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WITHOUT MERCY

BY

JOHN GOODWIN

L.C.

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
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1920

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Dedication

TO MY GOOD FRIEND AND SOMETIME SHIPMATE,

ROBERT PARDOE

NEW YORK CITY, IN MEMORY OF A HAPPY CRUISE

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

In submitting, with diffidence, this book to the American public, I recall with a kindling glow of pleasure many lambent hours spent with many good friends from the United States, both in peace and wartime. And these are friendships which I believe can never burn low.

To an officer of the American Air Force (to whom I sketched the plot in my cabin at Dunkerque) I owe the suggestion that this book should be launched in the States at the same time that it left the slip-ways in England. I hope that he was right, and to him my acknowledgments and thanks.

Like all sailors I believe in omens. It seems to me a hopeful one that the story was conceived and born in an American-built and American-engined M.L. "Chaser" in service on the Belgian Coast in 1918, about the time the Hun was beginning to get it in the spinal vertebræ. Though the book, I am thankful to say, has nothing to do with the War.

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WITHOUT MERCY

WITHOUT MERCY

"If I were drowned in the deepest sea,
Mother o' mine, oh, mother o' mine!
I know whose tears would come down to me,
Mother o' mine, oh, mother o' mine!"

CHAPTER I

THE CHIEF OF GARTH'S

"Is Mr. Calverley below? Ask him to come up instantly, please."

The woman hung up the telephone receiver and sat back. There were papers and accounts on the rosewood table before her. The old panelled room was an excellent setting for her mature beauty. A light of power and determination shone in the fine eyes, a little dimmed by time.

On the floors below, the business of the bank was over for the day. The long panelled room upstairs was the inner sanctum of the bank of Garth, Garth & Trelawne—the last of the great private banks of London; one that stands alone,

and deals with the affairs of princes. As all the world knows, it is the only bank in London owned and controlled by a woman. Mrs. Enid Garth, last of the long line of Garths, whose portraits hung on the oak walls, held its vast affairs in the hollow of her very capable hands.

It was the rigid rule of the house that no one, from the highest subordinate downwards, should ever enter that wide upper room on any pretext whatever unless summoned there by Mrs. Garth herself. If she wished to see anybody, she telephoned for him. At the moment it was Mr. Calverley, her manager, whom she summoned.

He came at once—large, portly, looking like a benign and well-fed bishop, but with a firm mouth and steady, shrewd, grey eyes.

"Mr. Calverley," said his chief, motioning him to a chair, "I wish you to tell me what you know of this new financier who has burst like a comet upon London—the man of whom all the City is talking. I mean, Sir Melmoth Craven."

"I have made the usual inquiries," said Calverley; "he has great interests in South America. By all I can learn, his credit is of the highest."

Mrs. Garth tapped the table with her pen.

"His agents," she said, "have been making advances for a financial backing from Garth's."

"I should advise accepting."

Mrs. Garth turned suddenly in her chair, and looked the manager in the eyes.

"Why?" she said abruptly.

"It will be good business," replied Mr. Calverley.

Mrs. Garth paused, and looked straight before her.

"I feel it would be a mistake," she said slowly. "There is some mystery about this man. My instinct tells me to refuse any alliance with Sir Melmoth Craven."

Hugh Calverley shrugged his shoulders almost imperceptibly, and looked disappointed. He was a practical business man, and did not deal with instinct. But he dared not question a decision by Mrs. Garth. She turned the subject abruptly.

"Let us wind up the business for the day, Mr. Calverley."

For thirty minutes, Mrs. Garth discussed affairs with her manager, handling matters of finance and policy with a swift, decisive grasp that proved the born business mind. There was nothing speculative in it. Here at the bank, mistress of millions, she always made doubly sure, and refused all risk. Mr. Calverley had the profoundest admiration for her. "The head of Garth's," he had said many

times, "has never made a mistake." At the end, he took his notes and rose.

"A draft from the Crédit Marseillais has been paid in to us," he said, "for £60,000."

"Quite right," answered Mrs. Garth briefly; "it was due."

Mr. Calverley looked a little aggrieved. He hesitated.

"Mrs. Garth," he said, "you have called me your right hand at Garth's bank, and I have tried to deserve it. I have practically all the bank's business at my finger-tips. But—these amazingly heavy payments from the great French credit house? I know nothing of them or their origin, and they are enormously important." He paused. "Would it not be better to take me into your confidence concerning them?"

Mrs. Garth turned to Calverley, her face as hard as adamant.

"Mr. Calverley," she said cuttingly, "you have served this bank for forty years, and your father served mine. Have you not learned better than to ask questions on a matter that concerns me alone?"

Mr. Calverley bowed his head. He dared say no more. He took his leave, remarking as he went that the business of the bank had never been better.

Mrs. Garth smiled a little grimly to herself as she closed the door.

"Has it not?" she murmured. "I think I could give you a shock, my all-seeing manager."

She rose from her chair.

"And this man, Craven—what of him? What is it that tells me a new danger has come into my life? And tonight he is to be my guest. I must learn more of him. Well, Garth's bank has great resources—but I have resources that are greater than Garth's."

She moved to the door by which Calverley had left, and slipped home the little bolt. Mrs. Garth went to an archway in the back wall, panelled like the rest of the room, with smooth mahogany. One of the panels opened to her touch, disclosing a small cavity in which stood a telephone. Holding the receiver, she clicked the hook several times with her finger, apparently tapping out a Morse alphabet letter.

When the answer came, she spoke in a voice curiously thin, clear, and sharp.

"Is that Mr. Drave?—make the sign, please—repeat it! Good! I ordered you, two days ago, to get me the secret dossier of Sir Melmoth Craven. I require the full facts about him. It was to have been ready tomorrow."

A man's voice replied—deep, but sharp and curt as her own.

"It is ready now. I have it here, and it is complete. There is amazing stuff in it. I think you will find it very interesting."

"Excellent!" replied Mrs. Garth. "I will come to you at once. Wait for me. I will be with you in twenty minutes."

She closed the panel and, returning to the table, called up by the desk-telephone the number of her own house in Berkeley Terrace, where Mrs. Garth reigned as one of the most famous hostesses in London. A manservant answered, and she told him to bring her daughter to the telephone.

"Margaret," she called softly, "are you there? Listen, dearest. I may be an hour or more late—very urgent matters are keeping me. Darling, you will have to receive our guests and apologise for me."

"Yes, mother. But what is wrong?" said a gentle little voice in reply—a voice charming as the note of a flute. "Where are you?"

"Margaret, I have told you never to ask me that over the wire. I am in the City—that is enough. Can you hear me? I am so very sorry to leave you like this, dear—but get the dance going, and be hostess for me. You will do it charmingly. I shall not be very long."

Mrs. Garth picked up her gloves and left the table.

"It may take longer than I think," she murmured. "If Sir Melmoth Craven is not good enough for Garth's, perhaps Madame Vampire might suit him." A bitter little laugh broke from her. "Madame Vampire!"

"If Calverley knew—if the world knew where the wealth of Garth's and its princely charities really came from!" She paused, and added, scarcely in a whisper: "And—if Margaret knew!"

Mrs. Garth shivered slightly, stopped in her walk across the great room, and passed a hand across her eyes.

"No, no! It is impossible!" she murmured. "Margaret, the one bright star in my life, God forbid that Margaret should ever know!"

There were three doors to the room. One at either end led to separate exits in the huge public counting-house below. The third door, iron-studded, was set in an archway in the back wall. This one Mrs. Garth opened with a key and passed through. The door closed behind her with a soft double click, and silence reigned in the panelled room of Garth's.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN OF THE HOUR

"DOESN'T she look glorious?" said a young man at the ball-room door, with deep admiration. For a moment he forgot the girl at his side. But his partner bore no malice.

"She is perfectly lovely!" she said, with a little sigh. "There is not Margaret Garth's equal in all London tonight!"

The best band in London was playing a sparkling two-step, and the daughter and heiress of the house of Garth whirled down the great ball-room on her partner's arm. It was the first great dance of the autumn season, but in all that brilliant assembly there was no girl who could rival her beauty.

Margaret's eyes, sapphire-blue, had none of the jewel's hardness, but rather the soft sheen of a viola's petal, and the frank friendliness of a happy child's. Her dark hair, with its chestnut shimmer, was a perfect foil to the wonderful pearls twined

round her snowy neck. Few girls can bear that splendour of Southern colouring and yet be obviously and unmistakably English, but Margaret achieved it.

The man who danced with her was just as striking in his way. He was John Orme, the young M.P. His steel-blue eyes had still a boyish light in them, as though they had looked death in the face a hundred times. Orme, for all his youth, had the unmistakable stamp of the ex-soldier.

A poor man, and a poor man's son, but with a wonderful Army record and a recently won seat in Parliament, he had felt at first slightly embarrassed in this resort of the super-wealthy, yet he would not have changed places at that moment with any man on earth. Orme himself was tall and remarkably handsome, lithe and tough of frame, with sun-tanned forehead and a clear-cut, fighting jaw. Men said of him, "a splendid friend and a straight enemy." Women liked his shy smile and gentle deference—they were the only living creatures who could scare John Orme.

Margaret knew no more of him than that he held the V.C., and that his attacks on war profiteers, and the super-rich generally, had won him the reputation of being the fiercest young firebrand in the Commons. She could hardly believe

it. He knew enough of Margaret to feel convinced that she was the most glorious and desirable girl in creation. As he steered her through the throng, her soft breath on his shoulder and her lithe body like thistledown on his arm, an almost insane ecstasy mounted to his head like wine.

"What do you think of the dance?" laughed Margaret, glancing at him. There were two hundred guests, but everything had gone smoothly, and the Garth ball was in full swing. "Alone I did it! My mother is away, and I am playing hostess for her."

"It is a triumph!" said Orme. "You have done it splendidly, Miss Margaret."

"I miss my mother, though. I was frightened at first. I wonder what can be keeping her? Do you like my pearls? They are her gift to me on my birthday. But I forgot!" said Margaret, laughing. "You are a revolutionist. You would like to tear them from me and give me for a necklace the guillotine!"

"A revolutionist! I?" exclaimed Orme. "You were never more mistaken. Why should you liken me to brutes who murder women? I am no Hun!"

"But rebellion's your creed, isn't it? The great cry—the People to the front, and a new world in the making!"

"All I care for is the world's happiness and sanity," said Orme. "Fair play for the men who fought, and who come back to a country that has forgotten everything but how to bleed them." His eyes flashed for a moment with a hard light; then he laughed, and looked down into the sweet face close to his. "But, good heavens, who wants new worlds on such a night as this, with such music, and you to dance with! I say, you aren't tiring yourself, Miss Margaret—you who have so much to do! Shall we sit out the rest?"

"No, no!" she said. "Not while this music lasts. You dance well, and I could waltz to the end of time with a good partner. Quicker!"

Orme obeyed. He felt that he would have flung his whole career out of the window for one breath of encouragement from her—for the least hint that even for a moment she could prefer him to others. It was what his soul burned for. But the response was not there. Nothing but frank friendliness, and perhaps a touch of patronage.

As the couple floated down the ball-room, a man, standing by the wall, turned to look at them. It was Vernon Haggard, K.C., a barrister famous in the Criminal Courts—a big man, clean-shaven, with an immense forehead, but a loose, sensual mouth.

"Lucy," he said to a woman standing beside him, and there was a slight frown on his face, "do you see that? Aren't things moving rather quickly between Margaret Garth and that fellow Orme?"

His companion—a society dame of many seasons—laughed lightly.

"On his side, yes; on hers, never!" she replied briefly. "Indeed, I wonder Mrs. Garth can countenance a man like Orme."

"She does more than countenance him," said Haggard gloomily. "She is backing him. Oh, not financially, of course—the woman does not exist whom John Orme would take money from—but socially. Mrs. Garth has the quickest eye in England for a winner. He'll be a power in the land before long. You can't stop fellows like Orme."

"Why, he's a Bolshevik!" said Mrs. Vane-Ewing curtly.

"Hardly. He claims to be fighting Bolshevism, and his way is to declare red-hot war on the profiteers and money-riggers. He has a wonderful following for a man of his age. Enlisted as a private, demobbed as a brigadier, V.C., and D.S.O. Carried the Westington election hands down, and, though three parts of the House hate him—they listen to him. All that has an effect on a girl like Margaret. If——"

"Nonsense!" said the woman. "You have no eyes. See!" She laid her fan on his arm. "Here comes one who counts more with Margaret than a hundred Ormes!"

Haggard turned slowly, and looked at the man who was just entering the ball-room.

"Sir Melmoth Craven, the financier?" he said thoughtfully.

"A man of mark, if you like, and a real power," said Mrs. Ewing. She laughed a little maliciously. "Since you seem so interested, Vernon, watch!"

The music had ceased, and Margaret, who had parted from Orme, was moving towards the door as the new-comer arrived. His entry caused a little stir among those who were nearest.

Orme looked across. A quick frown of anger and amazement knitted the young man's brow.

The new-comer, on whom his eyes rested, was one whose public schemes he had attacked fiercely in the Commons, and whose private life, from what Orme knew of it, filled him with distrust.

Sir Melmoth Craven was not young—he might have been any age between thirty and fifty. His hair was iron-grey, his face handsome but deeply lined under the eyes. He was of more than average height, and had an air of great distinction.

He moved across the room as though the well-

dressed throng in it were merely furniture. Making straight for Margaret, his narrow eyes and rather thin lips melted into a smile of wonderful charm.

"How delightful you look, Miss Garth," he said gently, "and how trivial the affair seems now that kept me back—I am nearly an hour late. I have not seen my hostess yet."

"I am your hostess, Sir Melmoth," said Margaret; there was a quick answering flush on her cheeks. "My mother is not here. I will find you a partner."

"There is no partner for me if you abandon me," he pleaded. "Did you not promise me this dance two nights ago?"

He had his way. Ten seconds later Margaret was whirling down the room to the lilt of the band, in the tall man's arms. Despite his years, he danced superbly, and so brilliant a combination did the girl's beauty and the man's distinction make that, even in that blasé assembly, many heads were turned to follow them, and many comments were made.

To Orme, the sight was hateful, and the fighting light came into his eyes. To see the woman one loves dancing with another man is a common enough thing, and does not generally strike a note of tragedy; but with the knowledge he had of Mar-

garet's partner it made every nerve in Orme's body tingle.

Sir Melmoth Craven was totally unconscious of Orme's displeasure, and of his presence. He spoke occasionally to Margaret, and awoke her laughter; but the modern jazz step does not lend itself to conversation, and before the dance was over Craven steered his partner deftly to the side of the room.

"Shall we sit for a while?" he suggested. "I want so much to talk to you."

Margaret did not demur, and they were soon seated in two deep chairs, side by side, in a recess near the ball-room, so softly lit by the shaded bulb which shone from behind a palm that they could scarcely see each other's faces.

"Will you turn on the other lights, please?" said Margaret. "We have a habit of dimness here—my mother's eyes are not very good, and except in the ball-room we are always under-lit."

Craven did not at once obey.

"I am hoping your mother and I shall be friends," he said gently. "All that I have heard has made me regard her as one of the greatest women of the day. Do you know, I feel like an interloper, here in her house, when I am not even acquainted with her."

Margaret laughed.

"Few men let such a thing trouble them in London nowadays," she said. "I asked her to send you a card for tonight. It sounds dreadful doesn't it? But I do that sort of thing. I am very spoiled."

"It was absolutely charming of you."

"It seems strange you should not know my mother. You live in the North, don't you?"

"Yes; Cravenshaw is in the North," he said, smiling. "But the old place only came to me twelve months ago, and for years I have been an exile. There was only the estate and the name—my predecessors have been poor for a generation." He clasped his thin, strong hands over his knee. "I've been living a rough life in rough countries—striving for and hunting money as my forebears hunted foxes. And—well, I've made good!"

"And can settle down now as a country gentleman?"

Sir Melmoth laughed.

"No," he said briefly. "That will not suit me, except for a short holiday. I've the habit of work. I believe in work and power, and all the big, stirring things that life has to offer. I've had to fight for them, you see, and I know the things that matter."

"You must have had a wonderful life. Tell me about it."

He leaned forward and spoke. The master of Cravenshaw, when he chose, had a gift of speech that few men could equal; he talked with amazing charm, while Margaret listened eagerly.

Of all the forms of flattery that strike home, there is none so real as the deference paid by a man of the world to a young girl. The conquering conceit of a young man has no chance against it. Craven's whole air and manner gave Margaret to understand that she was the one woman under the sun whose opinion he valued, and that her confidence honoured him. He had seen and done great things, and he seemed to lay them all at her feet.

The blood ran quicker in her veins as she listened, his keen, strong face near hers, and a thrill ran through her nerves that was new to her.

She had known Sir Melmoth Craven for barely a fortnight. He had descended meteor-like upon London, to which he had been a stranger so long that few remembered him. But he bore an ancient name and title, was wealthy, and had a hand in great enterprises; his personal charm was undeniable.

Margaret had met him five or six times at some of

the best houses, and had felt his compelling power from the start. It gave way, sometimes, to a strange feeling of repulsion that crept over her, but that was gone and forgotten. She knew he was more to her than any man who had entered her life. And now, when the deep voice beside her suddenly ceased its deftly-told story of a man's well-fought victory over long odds—told simply and without conceit—she looked at him in silence.

"That was man's work, and well done," she said softly. "Yes, you have, as you say, made good, and won all that is worth having."

"No!" he said, with a changed voice. "I have won nothing!"

Margaret glanced at him, wondering.

"All that I have is dust and Dead Sea fruit," said Craven, in tones that vibrated strongly, "unless you care for me. Margaret—Margaret—I love you!"

The girl's heart seemed to stand still. She had scarcely dreamed of this. No words would come to her. Craven sought her hands and raised her to her feet.

"Women have never entered my life till now," he said. "I did not know that the fuller half of the world was hidden from me. Till I met you, I did not know what love was—and now you are to me

the world and all it holds. All in the hollow of your little hands, Margaret. I am not young, but everything I have and am is yours. If you love me, I ask only to live in your service. Come to me, and I will make the years wonderful to you—I will open for you the gates of Life!"

For a moment she stood silent, as if afraid, trembling slightly.

Then Craven drew her to him, and Margaret yielded, voiceless, with a little sob of surrender. He kissed her fiercely, holding her to him, and the girl hid her face in his coat, her heart beating wildly. Neither of them spoke.

Slowly Margaret raised her head. A thrill, like the cold edge of a knife, ran through her. Craven was looking over her shoulder towards the entrance to the recess, and a glare of such cold venom was in his eyes that the girl shrank.

"Melmoth!" she breathed. "What is it?"

The tall figure of John Orme had appeared for a moment at the entrance; he stood as if petrified by what he had seen, and his hands clenched till the knuckles grew white.

Margaret was standing with her back to the entrance. When she turned, startled, to follow the direction of Craven's glance, the figure in the doorway had passed on.

"What did you see?" she said faintly. "You looked so strange!"

"Nothing!" said Sir Melmoth, recovering himself, and he took her hands again. "Dearest, tell me that you are happy at last—that you love me, and trust me before all men! Here——"

"I am happier than I ever dreamed of being." The girl trembled slightly, and said suddenly: "Let us go where it is light. Somehow this dark place stifles me."

Craven protested, but quickly gave way, and they passed out into the ball-room.

John Orme had already made his way in the opposite direction.

It was by the merest accident that Orme, passing the recess, had seen what he did. And the sight had pulled him up in his stride, as if he had been shot. Barely for the inside of a moment, but it was long enough. Then he passed on.

With a curious, blind step Orme moved into the farther corridor, hardly knowing where he went or what he did. He stopped, leaned a hand against the wall. His face was drawn and white.

Orme bore upon his body the marks of three wounds—legacies of the Boche. But not one of them had caused him such agony as that which shot through his heart when he saw Margaret in

Craven's arms. It was the death-knell of his hopes.

"Margaret! And that man, of all living beings!" he gasped. "Ah, I think I would kill him first! The devil must be at work tonight!"

He became suddenly aware that someone was approaching him, and pulled himself together with a strong effort. A tall woman, superbly dressed, came up the corridor. She nearly ran into Orme before she saw him.

"Mr. Orme!" she cried. "Is it you?" Her voice changed to sudden concern. "What is the matter? You look ill."

"It is nothing, Mrs. Garth," he said, in a voice he tried to control. "I——"

"Have you seen my daughter anywhere? I am looking for her." Margaret and her partner passed at that moment, crossing the passage some little distance down. "There she is at last." Mrs. Garth paused a moment, and followed the couple with her eyes. "Who is that with her?"

"That," said Orme very quietly indeed, "is Sir Melmoth Craven."

Mrs. Garth had an ear keenly perceptive of tones. She darted a look of challenge and inquiry at Orme.

"You seem to mean something," she said abruptly. "Do you know him?"

Orme suddenly stiffened, and stood very upright.

"Mrs. Garth," he said in a clear, level voice, "it is impossible, for reasons which I think you will understand before the night is over, for me to say anything whatever to you about Craven."

He made a brief bow, and was about to withdraw. Mrs. Garth stepped forward, and her eyes searched his face keenly.

"I should like to see you presently, and speak with you," she said. "First, however, I must find Margaret."

She entered the ball-room, but for some time was unable to find her daughter. There were guests, too, on every hand, who had to be greeted and who delayed her. Mrs. Garth, who had admirable manners, showed no trace of anxiety or impatience, though for some reason she was feeling both. She was charming to everybody, but passed on her quest as quickly as she was able, and presently found herself in the recess where stood the two chairs. It was not occupied, but at the moment Margaret entered, accompanied by a man.

"Mother!" exclaimed the girl, darting forward with a glad cry and taking her hands. "Here you are at last! Have I done well?" She seemed overwrought and to be repressing some excitement.

"Mother, this is Sir Melmoth Craven." Her voice sank lower, and her eyes sparkled with happiness. "I have promised to be his wife!"

"Margaret!"

The girl paused, and then, with a little laugh, as if by some sudden impulse, flitted out, and left them together.

Mrs. Garth stood absolutely still. A curious little shiver—so slight as to be unnoticeable save to herself—ran through her, like some premonition of evil, as she looked at the man before her. Her eyes, though still handsome, were not at all strong, and in the dim light she could see no more than the outline of his face.

Sir Melmoth had bowed deeply when he was presented. As he raised his eyes to hers a faintly puzzled look passed over his countenance. He spoke with grave courtesy.

"Mrs. Garth, I should not open my acquaintance in such a manner, I know. But there are things in a man's life that take first place. May I speak to you very earnestly?"

Mrs. Garth, still silent, seated herself slowly in one of the chairs. The reason was that she felt unable to stand, but Craven naturally took it for acquiescence. He sank into the other chair, and leaned slightly forward.

"I must put myself in order," he said. "I am Craven, of Cravenshaw—a good name, I think—and now, at least, a good estate. As far as means go, and repute, I believe I need fear no scrutiny. These are banal matters, but you have the fullest right to know them. May I say that, for the time, I have hoped for an alliance with you of quite a different sort?

"But this is a greater matter—the greatest of my life. I have met your daughter perhaps half a dozen times. But I love her, and she loves me. She has promised to be my wife."

Instead of answering, Mrs. Garth stretched out a hand and clicked a little electric switch on the wall beside her. There were a couple of bulbs overhead that shone a sudden light full on Sir Melmoth's face.

A tiny gasp rose in the woman's throat, and was stifled between her shut teeth. A dreadful look shone for a moment in the fine-dimmed eyes, as though some evil thing, too vile to be faced, had suddenly confronted her—some ghost of the past, long forgotten.

The brusque increase of light, wholly unexpected, disconcerted Craven slightly. His pupils contracted, and he drew back a little.

When his eyes sought her face again, he saw

nothing there but the cold, well-controlled countenance of a woman of the world, who refused to betray herself by any outward sign whatever. By a supreme effort, Mrs. Garth had mastered her emotion.

She moved, so as to bring her face well into the light. Craven looked anxiously at her, as if beseeching her to reply. Not once had she opened her lips.

"May I hope for the reply that will make me happy?" he said gently.

Mrs. Garth rose to her feet. Her eyes had grown as hard as flint.

"My answer is easily given," she said in icy tones. "You are known to be interested in financial undertakings"—there was bitter scorn in her voice—"with which no one of my house could be allied. It is my deepest humiliation that my daughter's name should have been coupled, even for a moment, with yours!"

Craven sprang to his feet.

"Mrs. Garth, you speak as if I were an enemy, or as if you had been listening to enemies of mine! You know as little of me as I of you. In justice——"

"But I can end that instantly," she interrupted, as if he had not spoken. "Had I known a little

earlier what I have learned today, you would never have entered this house. Leave it at once, Sir Melmoth! Strike me from the list of your acquaintances, and never pass through my door again!"

"Are you in your senses?" he said thickly, and great veins began to stand out on his forehead.

"If you are not gone before I have occasion to tell you again," she said fiercely, "I will give you my reasons publicly, here in my own ball-room, and bar you from every decent house in London."

She struck her heel on the floor, and pointed to the entrance.

"Go!"

Craven looked her in the eyes, and turned away without a word. At the entrance, he stopped and glanced back.

"I think," he said quietly, "you may be rather sorry for this."

The next moment he was gone. Mrs. Garth sank into her chair, and suddenly buried her face in her hands. A little moan of sheer horror escaped her.

Craven, his face dead white, and his eyes red with anger, was already half-way down the staircase. On the broad landing he met Margaret, who came towards him with hands outstretched.

"Is all well, Melmoth?" she exclaimed gladly. "I could not help telling her then—I could not wait! Is— What is the matter with you?"

He caught her hands.

"Margaret," he said hoarsely, "she has turned me from the house. Someone whose interest it is has poisoned her mind. Remember only this—you are mine to all eternity, and I'll claim you in spite of all the world! You hear? If you know what love and loyalty are, do your part, as I shall do mine!"

He bent his eyes upon hers with the compelling gaze she knew well, and suddenly gripped her hands till she nearly cried with pain. Releasing her suddenly, he left the house without another word.

CHAPTER III

THE MARK OF THE BEAST

THERE was a lump in Margaret's throat as she turned blindly up the stairs again. Amazement and distress filled her. She sought her mother, but the recess was empty, and it was some time before she found Mrs. Garth, looking strangely white and ill, but talking quietly to a famous statesman in the ball-room. As soon as she was able, the girl drew her mother aside.

"What have you done?" whispered the girl, in tones that trembled. "Why——"

"Hush!" said Mrs. Garth, very gently, laying a hand on the girl's arm. "Not here. Remember our guests and our duty. I will hear all you have to say presently, Margaret. Only trust me."

Her tone was so final that Margaret turned away, feeling unutterably miserable. The dance went on; the glitter and the music continued hour by hour, and the smartly-dressed throng made merry in their own fashion. Mrs. Garth thought

they would never go. John Orme had left long before. Margaret had abandoned the whole affair, and was no more to be seen.

When the last guests had taken their leave, Mrs. Garth gave an order to the butler, and, going upstairs, passed into her own room. She came out in a few minutes, no longer wearing the somewhat unusually high-necked evening-gown that was habitual with her, but a lace dressing-gown. A soft, silken shawl was about her shoulders.

She paused on the landing. There was dread on her face, but resolutely she set her lips tight, and entered the boudoir.

Margaret was there, on the sofa. She raised her face, and it was tear-stained. Mrs. Garth locked the door, and crossing quickly to the girl, seized her hands.

A quick sob of love and pity broke from her.

"Margaret," she panted, "my darling, have you ever doubted that I love you more than anything in the world? That my one care on earth is to protect you and shield you—to make you happy?" The girl looked at her piteously. Then, with a little cry, she buried her face in her mother's breast.

"I know it," she said brokenly. "I know that you would give your heart's blood for me—as I

would for you. And so, mother, I cannot believe you will stand in the way of my happiness now!" A sob of pain shook her. "Ah, say you will not refuse me!"

"Heaven forgive me for having to hurt you so," said her mother in a low voice; "but what you ask in impossible."

"Why?"

"I will tell you quickly. I know more of Sir Melmoth Craven than London thinks it knows. I have sources of information that are closed to others. But the knowledge I now have only reached me today; had it been earlier, Sir Melmoth would have been refused admittance. Margaret, this man is a leading power in the Steinberg Syndicate—a band of financial brigands who exploit the poor, traffic in the necessaries of life, and enrich themselves by juggling with the wealth of others. He may be rich—or not. He can be charming—when it pays him. But he has neither repute nor honour."

Margaret tore her hands free with a gesture of impatience, and stood up.

"What is all this to me?" she cried. "I know nothing of business, mother! But am I a child, that I cannot judge a man's worth? I suppose all this means that Mr. Orme, who attacks everyone

wealthier than himself, has chosen to denounce Sir Melmoth Craven!" she said scornfully.

"Mr. Orme has less than nothing to do with it, Margaret. I tell you what I know."

"And I tell you," said the girl defiantly, "that I love Melmoth and honour him!"

Mrs. Garth stepped quickly forward, and placed her hands on the girl's shoulders.

"Margaret," she said in a voice that quivered with emotion, "I know the world and women as few know them, and I tell you this from the bottom of my soul—you do not love Sir Melmoth! Look me in the eyes! I say you do not love him. He has fascinated you, carried you off your feet—as he has done with many before you! You are scarcely sane tonight—it is not love that you feel! And more—I tell you that he does not love you! Ah, it's bitter to have to say this to you, but it is true. He has trapped you, for the man is base to the core!"

Margaret drew back.

"What is all this?" she exclaimed passionately. "Words—words! We Garths deal with life at first hand! I have heard it from Melmoth's own lips, and I know when a man speaks the truth!" A cry, piteous but defiant, came from the girl. "I love him! He has held me in his arms—he has

kissed my lips! I gave him my word, and I will never break it!"

She threw herself on the couch, and buried her face in her arms, sobbing.

Mrs. Garth stood silent. Her face was drawn with pain; she felt the infinite pity and sorrow that only a mother can know. Behind it burned a fierce anger at the cause.

"There seems to be some curse on the women of our name," she said under her breath. "We throw all in the balance, and wreck our lives when the lightning stroke comes, and the man calls."

She looked at her daughter, and knew well that argument or reason would be wasted.

"I shall lose this fight," the elder woman whispered to herself, "unless—there is the last resort. She will do some mad thing—she is out of my hands, sundered from me. Ah, I think I would kill myself, and her, rather than let this come to pass!"

A look of agony passed over her face. She walked up and down the room twice, with a faltering step, as if hesitating. A sob was stifled in her breast. And then came determination.

"It is the only way," she breathed—"the only way!"

She passed quickly across and knelt by her daughter.

"Margaret," she said softly, "listen to me. I shall tell you how Melmoth Craven once treated a woman—and I shall be very brief. I swear to you that it is true. You owe me this. Will you listen, Margaret?"

"Yes," said the girl dully, without raising her head; "it will make no difference."

"Hear, then." She took her daughter's hands in hers. "Many years ago, a girl whom I knew well—almost as well as I know you, for she was related to me—was living in South America with her brother. He held a Government post—a commissionership of mines. The girl kept house for him. They were English, and bore a name well known.

"The Government post came to an end, a successor came out to wind up, and this young Englishman I speak of, being now free, with his own way to make, went up-country into the wilds. His quest was a silver mine, which he had discovered in the hills a little while before, and believed might prove of great value. It transpired, later, that he was right. His object was to secure his claim and titles to this mine. His sister went with him on the expedition, riding at his side through that wild forest country. She was active and fearless—made for a frontierswoman. Are you listening, Margaret?"

Margaret nodded listlessly.

"Before they arrived at the place for which they were making, the man was suddenly stricken down by the fever of the country, and in less than ten hours he was dead. His sister was heart-broken. All she could do was to bury him, with the help of the two native servants who had accompanied them. Except for these, she was now alone in that wilderness. And then it was that Melmoth Craven came upon her.

"At that time, Craven was a young man, who had left England under a cloud, and was seeking his fortune in the same country. He already knew the girl, and had made love to her. Knowing his character, and disliking it, she had repulsed him. Craven had got wind of the silver mine prospect her brother had found, and was following with the intention of jumping the claim—as they call it—himself.

"Craven was travelling with a following of Gauchos and ruffians, such as that land is full of. Even the two servants who were with the girl were in his pay. And now, two hundred miles from the nearest civilisation, she was in his power.

"Craven demanded from her all details of the mine's whereabouts, which she had from her brother. She refused. Melmoth Craven's answer

was simple. He said he was glad of her refusal —that it gave him pleasure—and the end would be the same. Since she declined his offer, the lash should make her speak, and she should be a gift to his Indian followers."

Margaret started, and looked up slowly.

"Shall I tell you what he did?" said Mrs. Garth, her voice tense and quivering. "You have to know it now! He had her stripped to the waist, and her wrists tied to a sapling, and in that forest clearing, before the eyes of the scoundrels who were with him, the lash was laid upon her with all the strength of a half-breed's arm.

"Margaret, there are men on earth who are devils of cruelty, to whom cruelty is a passion, and all that passion means! Craven took the whip into his own hands!" Mrs. Garth's voice died in a dry sob. "In the end, she was delivered from him. He could do no more than he had done." There was another pause. "Margaret—have you nothing to say?"

Margaret had risen to her feet. There was terror and amazement on her face—and even bewilderment that mingled with the shock. The thing was beyond her, and Mrs. Garth saw it.

"Margaret, it is more than your mind can conceive! But you are my daughter, mine is the

sacrifice, and I will save you from Craven! Heaven forgive me that you have driven me to this!"

With a sudden movement, she stood erect, and untwisted the silken shawl from her superb, white shoulders.

Deep-scarred across the ivory skin, in ragged, red wheals that crossed and recrossed, were the twenty-year-old scars of the lash.

"Look well, Margaret, at what no living soul has seen since then! There is the work—these are the marks—of the man you wish to marry!"

CHAPTER IV

CUTTING THE THREAD

MARGARET's eyes dilated with horror that was beyond speech. She swayed where she stood; a broken cry of love and pity came from her. She fell upon her knees before her mother.

"Ah, forgive—forgive me!" she moaned. "That this thing should have come upon you! My mother—my darling!"

She burst into a dreadful storm of sobbing. Her mother's white arms were thrown around her, and held her tightly.

"Hush, dearest—hush!" The firm, strong voice was tender now, and as steady as the deep note of an organ. She held the girl to her bosom. "It is finished. There is no reproach to you, darling—none. I would have given my soul to save you from this pain. There was no other way. You were fascinated as though by a snake! For deadly maladies, one must use the knife. For my pain I care less than nothing—it is enough that I have saved you!"

The girl rose and stood back. There was a feverish light in her eyes.

"Save me?" said Margaret. "Yes, it is true. Mother, you have saved me from hell." She said it quite quietly, as if in a dream, and repeated it. "But there must be vengeance on—the man!" Her voice rose to a cry; a frenzy seemed to possess the girl at the thought of her mother's wrong. Her white hands clenched, and the soft eyes turned to fire.

"What madness was in me that I could think I loved that fiend?" she gasped. Her breath hissed between her teeth. "Ah, if he were here, I believe that I would kill him with these hands! Not for the insult to me, but for what he has done to you—this fearful thing! Mother—I will not rest till——"

"Stop!"

Mrs. Garth's voice rang out in sudden, sharp command. Her hand closed firmly on the girl's wrist. With a quick movement she replaced the silk shawl about herself.

"Margaret—for Heaven's sake! Vengeance is not for you. For you, Melmoth Craven no longer exists. I am not entreating you now—I give you this as my order. The thing that you have come to know is now to be forgotten, as if it had never

been! I have made my sacrifice, and it is for you to obey. You hear?"

Margaret strove to calm herself.

"There must be punishment—for such as he!" she said brokenly.

"Now? Do you think such a thing can be done, without all the world knowing the cause? Here in England, where all things come to light?" The woman stood erect, and the firelight shone on her white, proud face. "Do you doubt that I would kill myself, if any living soul but you were to know what you know now—or even dreamed of it? Do you not see?"

The girl's hands fell to her sides with a slow, hopeless gesture. For a moment neither spoke.

"Yes," she said in a whisper. "I see it."

"Enough, then. I have only another word to say, and it is this: While I was suffering that—torment—the life all but went from me. Those human devils left me for dead. For so it came about, they were interrupted at their work by a chance that Fate sent. Native police came through the forest, and the cowards who were torturing me fled. In the end I fell into better hands, but it was a year before I was sane or sound. It is a long, unhappy story, nor is there

any need to fill it in for you now. Since it is dead, let it rest so."

Margaret bowed her head. But there was fear in her eyes as she looked up quickly.

"The man himself—what of him?" she said with a shiver. "He is here in our midst, and he at least knows."

"And I say that he does not know!" replied the elder woman, clearly and with absolute decision. "The thing is twenty years old; I have not seen Melmoth Craven from that day to this. Name—position—all are changed. He did not recognise me. I gave him every chance. I placed myself in the light, and watched him. One glimmer of knowledge in Craven's eyes, even the fraction of a second, and I should have seen it. The man does not live who could deceive me in such a case."

She paused.

"It is no great wonder. Doubtless, I am only one of many. But the thing Craven did to me no woman could forget in a thousand years. I should have known him had I been blind, or dying. To Craven—as yet—it is all a blank; he does not know. It is possible he never may.

"Margaret, the last word is said. Have I your promise? By neither act nor speech will this be touched on by you again, nor shall I ever breathe

to you a word of it. Try, by all the strength that is in you, and the pride, to forget this night's trial. Youth and life are before you; there shall be happiness for you yet."

"I shall obey you, mother," murmured Margaret, "as I love and honour you."

The girl suddenly swayed, tottered blindly, and would have fallen. Her mother's arms received and held her fast. The little laden heart could bear no more, and Nature was merciful. Lifting Margaret as if she were a child, Mrs. Garth bore her gently to her own room.

Insensible to all about her, she was laid to rest. For more than an hour Mrs. Garth sat motionless by the bedside, looking with infinite anxiety and tenderness at the fair face that rested on the pillow like a tired flower. At last the girl opened her eyes, gave a little fluttering sigh, and with a faint clasp of her mother's hand sank into a deep sleep.

Mrs. Garth bent over her silently, and dried the hot tear that had fallen from her lashes upon the girl's cheek.

"All is well," the woman whispered. "Youth is before her, and love. My darling, thank Heaven I have lived to stand between you and evil."

She went out, closing the door softly. And then the face of Mrs. Garth changed so swiftly that she

seemed transformed. A light came into her eyes, pitiless as fire, and more terrible than a drawn sword.

"Wait a little, Melmoth Craven—only a very little while, until I choose the time and place. You have now two debts to pay; you will pay them to me tenfold and a hundredfold. The sands have nearly run out!"

. . . . . .

It was late the next day when Margaret left her room. Though nothing could mar the beauty of her face, she was very white, and there were dark shadows beneath her eyes. But these had still the light of pride, and she held her head very erect.

"Mrs. Garth left the house soon after nine, Miss Margaret," said the butler, in answer to her inquiry. "She had left orders that you were not to be disturbed. Can I get anything for you?"

"No," said Margaret. "But send word to the stables that Lassie is to be saddled and brought round as soon as possible."

"Very good, Miss Margaret. Is Bulstrode to accompany you?"

"No. I will go alone."

The butler bowed and withdrew. In ten minutes a black mare, with perfect shoulders and a mouth like a kid glove, was led to the wide front-

door. Margaret, who had come down in her riding-habit, settled into the saddle lightly as a feather at the least lift from the hand of the groom who watched her admiringly as she rode away.

"Ain't looking up to her form today," said the groom to himself. "Wish we could get out o' this rotten town an' down to the shires. Ridin's what she needs—a 'oss under her an' a good fence in front."

The groom was right. Margaret had risen to find herself weary beyond belief and with unstrung nerves. With all the will-power that remained to her she tried to shut her mind to what had passed, and to regard it all as some evil nightmare.

To keep social engagements and to talk to strangers would be maddening. To remain in the house and think, worse still. She had decided at once that the only thing she could bear was swift action and movement; the black mare Lassie was the surest cure at hand, and she had chosen well.

She passed through Berkeley Square, and turned into the park at the Lane Gate. A brisk, cool wind was blowing, and the yellowing leaves were falling in little showers on the hoof-marked gravel, blowing along in front of her as if in invitation. Margaret turned into the Ladies' Mile, and, speaking to the mare, broke into a brisk canter.

The wind whistled by her and the gravel spirted up behind; she covered the distance at a pace that would have caused trouble had the mounted policeman been at hand.

But the park was all but deserted; the fashionable hour for riding had gone by. Margaret turned back, and, passing the Achilles statue, trotted into the Row itself. Here, also, there was unusual solitude, and it suited her mood well. With a short breather or two between sharp gallops, she went down almost to Kensington Gardens, and, reining the mare to a walk, turned Lassie's head homewards.

The sparkle had come back into her eyes and the colour to her cheeks. She was breathing quickly; the elasticity of youth and the free wind swept the phantom of the night from her brain. Margaret rubbed the mare's shapely neck with the butt of her little rhinoceros-horn whip, and spoke to her affectionately. Lassie whinnied, and the next moment threw her head up and swerved aside as a horseman overtook her and reined up short alongside.

"Margaret!" cried a deep, eager voice.

The girl caught her breath, and her face seemed turned to stone. Close at her side was Sir Melmoth Craven, smart and spruce, sitting a big,

raking grey that he reined in rather brutally; his eyes were dark and lowering.

"I have ridden here three times today in the hope of seeing you! It was my only chance. Walk your mare, dearest. There is so much I have to say to you. Margaret——"

At that moment he met her eyes, only for the fraction of a second, and knew that his defeat was absolute.

Margaret rode on, looking straight before her.

"You shall speak to me!" he exclaimed; and, spurring forward, laid a hand on the mare's bridle. The girl half-turned in her saddle, the hand that held the little jewelled riding-whip flew up, and, with all the strength of her arm, she lashed Craven across the face.

Craven gave a gasp, and flung his hand across his eyes, biting upon an oath. The mare plunged wildly and tried to bolt, breaking into a gallop. Margaret, steady in the saddle, pulled the beast to a walk within a hundred yards, and rode quietly on, without even looking back.

Craven lowered his arm; there was a bright red wheal standing out against the dead white of his face, and it was like the face of a demon.

There were few witnesses to the incident—only a gaping nursemaid and an amazed but grinning

errand-boy. Sir Melmoth sat motionless a few seconds, then, driving the rowels into the sides of the grey, while still holding him short, he turned and rode swiftly westwards.

"So be it!" he said, through his teeth. "There's another way—less profitable, but sweeter to the taste—and she shall have it."

More than one passer-by turned his head and looked curiously at the horseman's face when he left the park. But before he handed over his horse to the ostler at the mews near his quarters, the impenetrable mask had settled down once more on Craven's features, and he made his way up into his luxurious rooms in Prince's Gate.

His first move was to the brandy decanter and syphon. There was a tape-machine close to the desk by the window, with curls of paper ribbon streaming from it to the floor—messages that had come since he had been away. As Sir Melmoth set down his glass, his eye was caught by the heading of one of the typed paragraphs.

It made him start, and stare. He snatched up the strip of paper, and read eagerly.

"Industrials.—Heavy selling in Western Unions and Paraguay Debentures. Sales approaching panic prices. Drop of two points. Shares almost unnegotiable."

Craven turned even whiter than he was when he entered. His hands shook slightly. At that moment the machine began to whirr and click again:

"Closing prices: Western Unions, 1¾—1½."

Sir Melmoth let the paper ribbon fall, and stood aghast. The few plain figures meant that a blow was struck, as though by some secret hand, at the very basis of his financial life, and at the worst possible time for him. Westerns had stood at 3½ the day before. The fall was appalling.

Before he could collect his faculties the door was thrown open and a fat, agitated man, with a hooked nose and straight black hair, strode in. He was dressed in the extreme of fashion, but his collar was damp, and there were beads of perspiration on his forehead.

"Steinberg!" exclaimed Sir Melmoth, as the visitor shut the door with trembling hands. "Have you seen this fall in Westerns?"

"Seen it!" gurgled the other. "The bottom's dropped out, man! I've been trying to get you on the 'phone for two hours. Where on earth have you been?"

There was emotion in the speaker's tone even greater than Craven's own.

"Steinberg, it's simply infernal! It will wreck

our whole operation. If we're not quick it may mean a crash for all of us!"

"Tell me something I don't know!" snarled his partner. "What of you? Can't your scheme help us out? What's your chance of a backing from Garth's? Have you fixed it up?"

"No! Impossible! No hope there. Look here, unless we can raise fifty thousand pounds to cover we shall go under!"

"I can tell you this," said Steinberg, rapping the table with his fat knuckles—"I've been digging out like a beaver for three hours, and an incredible thing's happened. I find there's not a sound house in London we can raise the money from on any security we're able to offer. Someone, who knows too much, has spoked our wheel!"

Craven swore softly.

"Steinberg," he said, in a lower tone, "you objected before, but there's only one thing for it now—we must try Gordon's."

The stout man was silent for some moments. He bit his lip hard.

"That money-lending joint near the Exchange —the one that's run by the old woman they call 'Madame Vampire'? What a come-down!"

"It's one of the wealthiest concerns of its sort in the world, and it's got the money, anyhow!"

"Yes, and the deadliest blood-suckers in Europe! You know what the end usually is, when any one goes to Madame Vampire." Steinberg spoke more slowly. "Still, if it's the only way—Can you get the stuff from there?"

"I believe I can, if you all agree and will leave it in my hands. We shall have to pay heavily, of course. But we must have the money at any price. I will try."

"Try then, at once! It's our last chance, and if you succeed it will save us and put us on top yet. Be quick about it! Craven," added Steinberg bitterly, "there's some enemy out to wreck us, and he's chosen his time well!"

Sir Melmoth looked at his partner, and his teeth clenched.

"It's true," he said, "and if I knew who it was I'd have an enemy the less within twenty-four hours!" He paused. "Can it be Garth's?"

"Impossible, surely, so soon as this? And yet who would have dreamed of such venom as they've shown already?"

He sank into a deep chair, ignoring Steinberg.

"Where have I seen that woman before?" he muttered presently.

Sir Melmoth sat for some time, motionless, staring before him. His eyes seemed to grope after some vision of the black past.

CHAPTER V

MADAME VAMPIRE

It was nearly seven in the evening when Mrs. Enid Garth, returned from Cornhill, entered her house in Berkeley Terrace. She appeared to be quietly satisfied with her day's direction as the head of Garth's Bank, and at the back of her eyes dawned a smouldering light of triumph.

There was not a trace of weariness about her. After many strenuous hours she looked more than capable of facing any situation. As she was drawing off her gloves in the side room where letters and telegrams were laid out, Margaret entered. One glance at the girl's face brought Mrs. Garth across to her quickly.

"Margaret, something has happened! Is anything wrong? Tell me at once, dear!"

"You are right," replied the girl quietly. "I do not know what you will say, mother."

Very briefly, and in cold tones, she mentioned the appeal that had been made to her the night

before when Craven had left the house, and related in a few words her encounter in the park.

Mrs. Garth drew a long breath, twisting the gloves tightly in her slender hands. For a moment she was deep in thought.

"I would give much if this had not happened," she said slowly. "It is the last thing I wished for."

"It was forced upon me," said the girl. "I hardly know, even now, what I said or did."

Mrs. Garth nodded.

"I cannot blame you, dear. One isn't oneself at such moments, and you are my daughter. But——"

"It is to introduce the forbidden subject," put in Margaret quietly. She was cooler and more self-possessed than her mother had seen her for a long time. She seemed to be speaking of something that was of no importance. "I am very sorry, mother."

Mrs. Garth looked at her daughter with quick approval.

"At least, it closes the whole wretched business absolutely and finally for you; that is something gained. No more of it." She embraced the girl tenderly. "And now, Margaret, you will do something to please me. Go down to Selby by the morning train. Stay there at least a few days.

Take your maid with you. You will be among friends, and there are plenty of horses. Get away from town, and everything in it, and be quiet. It's what you need."

"You know best, mother. Of course I will do what you say."

Margaret left for Selby Manor, the Garths' place in the North, by the morning express from King's Cross.

At ten o'clock, neither a minute later nor a minute earlier, Mrs. Garth stepped out of her open car, and once more entered the wide doors of Garth's Bank, on Cornhill. She scarcely seemed the same woman who had been hostess at the brilliant dance in Berkeley Terrace two nights before. Her air was business-like, her face expressed cool, clear judgment and determination.

Mrs. Garth went straight up past the bowing commissionaire, to the great panelled room on the first floor. Once more her summons brought up the manager.

Mr. Hugh Calverley's calm and bishop-like exterior was perhaps just a little ruffled. He had the appearance of a man who had passed through a strenuous thirty-six hours, which was indeed the case.

"I see, Mr. Calverley," said his chief, "that

Western Unions closed at one and a quarter last night. Our brokers ceased selling today."

Mr. Calverley sighed.

"The bank's entire holding of that stock has been thrown on the market," he said, "with the result I reported to you. Your orders, of course, have been carried out to the letter." He paused. "I fear it will cause us a loss."

"It will cause no loss at all," replied Mrs. Garth. "Has acknowledgment yet been made of that message concerning Sir Melmoth Craven?"

The manager bowed.

"From every source. The time was short, but it went through. Before noon on Tuesday a confidential message was sent to every reputable bank and financial house on our list—that Garth and Trelawne's, after full inquiry, refused all money dealing with Craven, and recommend the like action. It was in cypher, and prefixed by the usual code-word."

Mr. Calverley's air seemed to add, with a slight regret, "So much for Craven!" For in the secret freemasonry of the inner ring of bankers, as Calverley well knew, such a word was enough to lock the door in the face of any money-seeker in England, and would remain entirely secret. The reason for it he did not yet know, but was prudent

enough not to inquire. He directed the bank's business, but Mrs. Garth alone directed its policy.

"You have done excellently, Mr. Calverley. The remainder of today's affairs do not call for my attention. I will leave them in your hands."

Calverley withdrew. Mrs. Garth leaned her chin upon her hands, and for some time sat looking before her, lost in thought.

Self-reliance was in the woman's blood. Born Enid Trelawne, daughter of a relative of the family, then far from hope of inheritance, her father had died young. After eighteen months in South America, the obscure Enid Trelawne, returned to England, and married her cousin, Vincent Garth, head of the house and last of the name. He was killed in a motor accident some months before little Margaret was born.

Mrs. Enid Garth, heiress both by descent and marriage to the Garth heritage and all its splendour, reigned in his stead. And for twenty years she had shown a grasp and power even greater than the most famous of her forbears.

"A far cry, from little Enid Trelawne of Caragua to this!" said Mrs. Garth, rousing herself quickly, and rising from the table where she had sat silent. She glanced up at the stern, shrewd faces of the old Garth portraits that hung on the panelled

walls, and made a deep, half-humorous curtsey to her ancestors.

"A goodly heritage you have left me!" she said. "It will more than suffice to lay Craven in the dust." A bitter laugh broke from her. "Ah, Sir Melmoth, I never valued power as I value it now! The first steps have gone very well. It is not often I miscalculate—in a little while—perhaps today, who knows?—we shall see you in the net."

The telephone at her side rang briskly. She gave a slight start, and took up the receiver.

"Yes. Who it is? Mr. Orme, M.P.! Send him up at once."

John Orme walked into the room. He looked strangely worn and hollow-eyed, but still carried himself like a leader of men. Mrs. Garth, no mean judge herself, always recognised in the young M.P. a kindred power. She gave him her hand, and pointed to a chair.

"I am glad to see you," she said, "and I was hoping you would come. The House is not sitting, then?"

"No," he said wearily; "but I have come to see you about that cheque for the children's fund you promised me. It's badly needed. May I?"

"Certainly," she replied, sitting down, and taking a cheque-book from a drawer. "There is nothing I would so soon give it for."

She glanced at him with concern in her eyes.

"It pains me to see you like this. How pale and ill you are looking, Mr. Orme!"

"Am I?" he said quietly. "Life is a hard thing for all of us, at times. By the way, Mrs. Garth, I must apologise for leaving your house the night before last. I—I could not stay."

She dropped the cheque-book, and turned to him.

"We were talking of Sir Melmoth Craven when I saw you," she said.

Orme nodded.

"I have a word to say to you about that," she continued briefly. "Sir Melmoth Craven was in my house that night on false pretences. Had I known sooner what I learned that day, he would never have entered. I showed him the door, and I wish his presence in my house forgotten."

Such joy and relief flashed into Orme's eyes as neither man nor woman had ever seen there. For a moment he could not conceal it or keep it back. A wild happiness surged through his heart, like the sun breaking through black clouds. The woman he loved, though she might not be for him, was saved at least from Craven—saved, and free!

An infinite pity and sympathy for Margaret overwhelmed him. What must she have suffered

in that brief time—what must she be suffering now? None the less the storm was past. The thought made Orme flush to his temples. He was unspeakably thankful that no one knew what he had accidentally seen that night.

Then he became aware that Mrs. Garth's eyes were fixed on him. She was watching him keenly, curiously. He mastered himself, and answered in a quiet, level voice.

"It was well done, Mrs. Garth," he said. "You are rid of a rogue. I consider Craven's financial schemes infamous, and that is why I attacked him publicly."

"I missed your speech in the House, and only heard of it afterwards," Mrs. Garth replied. "I wish I had known it earlier. Craven was only a name to me then—a new-comer. I agree his schemes are infamous, though it is not easy to convince the world of that or to give proof, for he is very clever. Mr. Orme, do you know that his object was to obtain the support of Garth's Bank for his plans?"

Orme stared.

"Craven!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean to tell me he had the impudence for that? Why, I know now that he is shaky financially! Craven seeking money from Garth's! No," he added,

with a scornful laugh; "I should say he'd better go to Madame Vampire; she is nearer his mark!"

"Madame Vampire?" said Mrs. Garth slowly. "Isn't that the name some people give to a firm of money-lenders? I heard that a woman controls it."

"That's right. Gordon's, Limited. Run by a woman calling herself Madame Gordon. Usurers."

"Rather a difference," said Mrs. Garth, smiling, "between that and Garth's!"

Orme laughed.

"Difference! About the difference there is between the sun at noon and a glow-worm in a dark ditch, I should say!"

"I've heard it said they're extremely wealthy, though."

"Very likely!" said Orme shortly. "Many of these blood-suckers are. I know nothing of them, save hearsay. And don't mistake me, Mrs. Garth. I'm not attacking Madame Vampire. I dare say she's vile enough; but firms like that fatten almost entirely on other rogues.

"Shady business men, blackguards with money who squander it recklessly, and must have more at any price, or hard-pushed gamblers like Craven. These are the people who go to Madame Vampire. Let the robbers rob each other, say I! Honest

men and women are none the worse, and one day a clean sweep will be made of the rest!"

"A Daniel come to judgment!" smiled Mrs. Garth; but she looked at him with that intent, appraising expression. "Strange to find you championing such a woman as that!"

Orme flushed.

"I don't!" he replied. "Heaven forbid! But yet, abominable as she's said to be, I've heard strange stories of her. One especially came under my direct notice—a man I know. He was poor, and straight. Found himself in a tight place, and got right into her clutches. So badly, he thought, there was nothing for it but a bullet or the river. D'you know what she did? Burnt the bonds he'd given, and helped him out with money! It sounds incredible."

"Probably she did it for an advertisement to lure more fools into the net," answered Mrs. Garth quietly. "Threw away fifty pounds to win five hundred—eh?"

"Likely enough."

"But you didn't come here to talk to me about Madame Vampire," continued Mrs. Garth, taking up her pen. "This fund is run by you and your friend Quex, isn't it?" She handed him a slip. "This is for the children."

Orme took it, and gave a little gasp. The cheque was for £5,000.

"But this is princely!" he exclaimed. "I don't know how to thank you!"

"Then don't try. You will use it well. You seem to like children, Mr. Orme."

"Like children!" he echoed. "Who doesn't like 'em? We used to try and feed and clothe the children behind our lines in France, poor little beggars, early, when the Boche first came on. And I'll tell you this. There are tens of thousands of children in England today in worse cases than any of those!"

He put the cheque in his breast-pocket.

"I hate and fear charity for men! It only keeps open the sores of the world, instead of healing them. With children it is different. This money will lift a few of them out of the slime of the underworld, and make men and women of them. My friends and I thank you for it. But there shall be no peace for Craven, or for hundreds like him, whose clawings after gold fill the underworld with broken men!"

Orme's eyes lightened, and his voice rang out like a challenge.

"It is time that England came into her own. And we shall fight for that as pitilessly as we fought the Hun!"

Mrs. Garth looked at him with a curious stirring at her heart. The poise of his head, as the light fell athwart the clear, broad forehead and commanding face, filled her with a sense of the power that lay in him.

"Strike then, and strike hard!" she said. "I am one of the rich, but so far I am on your side. Remember, too, that you have enemies, and you will find Craven harder to fight than the Hun!" She held out her hand. "Come and see me tomorrow night at my house."

Orme's eyes lit up. He seemed about to ask a question, but checked himself.

"Certainly I will come!" he said. "Thank you again!" He grasped her hand, and left the room abruptly.

As the door closed Mrs. Garth stood for some time silent.

"If I live," she said softly, "I shall see that back-bench member in the Premier's seat. For, sooner or later, John Orme will rule England! I was never mistaken in any man yet." She cast her cheque-book into the drawer. "And I may rule England through John Orme."

"Meanwhile," she added, with a hard little laugh, "it seems that Madame Vampire preys upon the failing rich as Craven upon the needy poor.

Madame Vampire, you have found a champion today. But what, I wonder, would John Orme say if he met you in the flesh?"

She took down the telephone receiver.

"Is that Mr. Calverley? I am leaving for two hours."

The manager answered, and she laid the receiver down clear of the hook.

Mrs. Garth quietly opened the centre door in the archway of the back wall, passed through, and, closing it behind her, walked down a bare stone passage. It came to a dead end, with a great steel grille-door on either hand.

The grille to the left, securely locked, led to the impregnable strong-rooms, thief-proof and fire-proof, for which Garth's was famous. It was the right-hand grille, however, which Mrs. Garth opened, and she made her way down a second passage of solid stone, which ended in a tall iron door, of older make. It looked like a giant safe.

This was the inner core of all, the private strong-room, to which none but the head of Garth's had access. Mrs. Garth drew from the inside bosom of her dress a small gold locket hanging by a chain. Inside it were two tiny keys. With these, small as they were, she was able to open the great door, which swung on its hinges to a touch.

She stepped quietly inside, clicked the button of an accumulator-lamp, and closed the iron door. The cunningly-made bolts shot home.

The lamp, standing on a low shelf, shed a brilliant light over the interior. A folding-chair was before the shelf.

Mrs. Garth seated herself in this, and drew from a recess a little box. It contained many curious items, and in its lid, when opened, was fixed a broad mirror.

It would have been worth a fortune to the enemies of Mrs. Garth could they have seen what followed.

With deft, unerring fingers she applied to the smooth skin of her features a thin paste, that in a few seconds gave to a fair face the dead and yellow hue of age. There is no make-up that has so deadly an affect of change as yellow, nor could any mistress of the art in the stage world have excelled Mrs. Garth's skill.

Her hands flitted swiftly from one compartment of the box to another, and thence to her features. Wrinkles and crow's-feet seemed to grow upon the yellow skin as her fingers worked; the blonde eye-lashes took a dull, dark hue, the lips were lightened and pencilled to a thin, pale line, and the cheek-bones appeared to heighten.

A touch of fluid from a tiny camel-hair brush was applied to the eyes themselves, the hands were treated last, and acquired a yellow and shrivelled look. There was something fearful about the thoroughness of the work, and not less amazing was its rapidity.

Next, the change of costume was as deft and as quick. A walking gown of plain, almost shabby black, was fitted over the woman's smart tweed costume, concealing it entirely. A thin front of dull-grey hair was held down by a small black hat, over this a dark veil, which did not, however, conceal the yellow features.

Mrs. Garth stood up, and, with infinite care, added a few finishing touches. She looked at herself in the mirror, and the narrow lips curved in a sinister smile.

"Madame Vampire," she said in a faint whisper, "your hour arrives!"

The farther side of the safe opened to her keys—a smaller and lower door, through which she stooped to pass. When she closed it, and flashed a little pocket-lamp on the damp stone wall which lay beyond, it was no easy matter to see where the door hung. It was a relic of the old Georgian days of Garth's Bank.

But from the moment that she passed through,

Garth's and all its world was left behind. Neither those that loved nor those that hated her dreamed of that supreme secret, it was hers alone.

Through passage after passage and corridor after corridor she made her way, some of them too narrow for two to walk abreast. Down a flight of stone steps, and up another, traversing the full breadth of a block of buildings, till a door let her through into a small white-washed room, into which daylight came by a narrow window. The room was empty.

It led into a far larger room, whose walls were tinted a dull red. Here there was a wide desk, at which a woman sat, silent and idle.

It was the climax of that amazing journey, of that strange transformation. For the woman was the very replica and counterpart of Madame Vampire. The yellow skin, the yellow hands, the black costume—and the veil. Here was the model upon which Mrs. Garth had built, outwardly at least, the sinister disguise that she wore.

And the woman at the desk neither spoke nor moved. She sat there dully, drowsing.

Mrs. Garth touched her on the shoulder, and pointed silently to the door through which she herself had come. The woman rose, and, without a word, obeyed the gesture. She took her place

in the inner room, and the door was locked upon her.

Mrs. Garth seated herself at the desk, glanced round the room, and pulled out the mouthpiece of a speaking-tube beside her. She touched a bell-press at the same time, and when she spoke her voice was thin and harsh.

"Mr. Drave! I am ready now for any business that may need my attention. You understand? None but the most important. Deal with all others yourself as usual. I am seeing big clients only for the next two hours."

CHAPTER VI

THE GAUCHO WHIP

SIR MELMOTH CRAVEN came down the front steps of the house in Prince's Gate, and entered the taxicab his servant had called for him. The time was eleven-thirty on the morning after his stormy interview with Orme.

"Royal Exchange!" he said curtly to the driver, and pulling up both windows, threw himself back on the seat.

His eyes were dark and strained, his air ill at ease. Beside him on the cushion was a locked dispatch-case on which his hand still rested, nor did he let go of it throughout the journey.

"We play the last card," he said to himself, with a sigh. "And little though I like it, if this Gordon firm will advance the money, our corner is safe. That amazing old woman! We never thought to come down to such as she. But there's one golden advantage in her—speed. If the answer's yes, the stuff will be forthcoming at once.

And we must have it within thirty-six hours, or go down!"

His narrow eyes grew narrower as he glanced through the window at Piccadilly, rolling past.

"And should we win, I'd give £5,000 from the profits to know for sure who it is that's put it across us like this! It's not that cur Orme, though I owe him a debt that I shall pay in full. Nor do I see how it can possibly be Garth's. They are too well known—they could not do it without our tracing their hand in the job.

"Neither Steinberg nor Ducros, the keenest men in London, can find the least hint. Well, it is bound to come out at last. And when we've won, we shall be able to strike the strongest enemy in his vitals. But if we lose——"

Craven set his teeth hard. The mysterious, unseen stroke at his fortune still baffled him. His partners, shrewd and expert as they were, could not trace it, and Steinberg now suspected that the trouble came from a new quarter. However, it was useless to speculate—facts were what Sir Melmoth dealt with.

The taxi made its way rapidly eastwards, and pulled up at the Exchange, where Sir Melmoth dismissed it. The exchange itself was by no means his goal. He made his way on foot to a

small back thoroughfare called Gresham Lane, between Cornhill and Lombard Street. Half-way down this on the left was the money-lending den which had a sinister fame throughout the City.

Outwardly the establishment looked like nothing but a small, double-fronted shop, with a grille of iron bars over the low, grained glass windows on either side. Beside the door a small, bright brass plate inscribed "Gordon's, Limited." The door stood open.

Inside was a small hall and staircase, on the right an inquiry office, where Craven found four flashily dressed but earnest-looking men busy at their desks. One of them took him across the passage into an office marked "Private," where sat Mr. Samuel Drave, the manager.

Drave was a stout man of fifty, with a thick, beaked nose. The commanding look and air of distinction of the visitor did not impress him; he asked Sir Melmoth's business with the curtness of a money-lender who does not need to be polite to his clients.

"I wish to see Madame Gordon," said Craven. "And at once."

"Madame Gordon is engaged. Have you an appointment?"

Craven had not the faintest intention of making

an appointment, nor of committing himself beforehand in any way—on this he was determined from the first. He repeated his request more curtly.

"Without an appointment no one sees Madame Gordon," returned Drave. "I have full power to transact any business. You can deal with me."

Sir Melmoth brought his hand down on the desk with a thump that made Mr. Drave start.

"I do not deal with under-strappers," he said harshly. "Take me to Madame Gordon!"

The man turned without a word, and, entering an inner room, made a communication through a speaking-tube. He returned, and, handing an envelope to Craven, asked him to put his card in it and seal it up.

Sir Melmoth did so. He knew on good authority that one thing could be relied on at Gordon's, and that was secrecy. Drave took the card upstairs, and was absent for some time. Presently he came back, and signed to Craven to follow him.

As Sir Melmoth passed up the narrow, straight staircase, he noticed a sallow un-English looking man of herculean build, and curiously high cheekbones, lounging idly at the stairs' foot. Another, somewhat similar, passed into a room on the landing as Craven reached it. He paid no attention to either of them, save for a passing glance.

Drave led him through an ante-chamber into a long, low room, whose walls were tinted a dull red. Behind a wide desk, facing the door, sat a woman writing busily with a little pile of papers beside her. She glanced up, nodded slightly, and, with a silent gesture of her pen, motioned Sir Melmoth to a chair that stood in the full light of the window. Drave withdrew.

Sir Melmoth seated himself, and looked keenly at Mrs. Gordon, who continued to write as though he were not there. This, then, was "Madame Vampire" in the flesh. Despite himself, a little tingling shiver ran through Craven, for she was not a pleasant sight to look upon.

He saw before him a woman clad in a walking-dress of plain, almost shabby black; she still wore a small hat and thin black veil, which did not, however, conceal her features. Her face was a parchment yellow, much lined and wrinkled, the hollows of her eyes very dark, and the eyes themselves shone with a beady, blue light. Thin, grey-white hair was drawn low over her forehead to either side, her lips seemed a thin, pale line, and the hand that held the pen was as yellow as her face, but decorated with a heavy opal ring.

She threw aside the pen at last, and sitting back, looked straight at Craven.

"What can I do for you?" she said, in a thin, grating voice, as passionless and inhuman as a phonograph.

"The same thing that, I suppose, most people come to you for," said Craven shortly. "I require a considerable sum, in hard cash, and as quickly as it can be arranged. I have a certain security here to offer; beyond that, I am ready to pay well."

The woman took Craven's card out of the envelope she had already opened, tore the slip of pasteboard in two, and tossed it into the fire.

"First, I have one invariable piece of advice for people who wish to deal with me," she said. "It is this: That they should be perfectly open, and attempt to conceal nothing, for it is quite useless. They seldom take my advice; but so much the worse for them. You say you have securities?"

Craven laid his dispatch-case on the table, took out a sheaf of papers and script, and a written list. He described and explained these at full length to Mrs. Gordon. She examined them rapidly and keenly herself, and seemed to pay no attention at all to what he was saying.

"What sum do you say you require?" she asked.

Craven hesitated a moment.

"Thirty thousand pounds," he replied. The

woman looked at him steadily, the hollow blue eyes behind the veil seemed to bite into him.

"A large sum," she said quietly, "yet it is not enough to cover you with safety. For you need fully fifty thousand pounds."

Craven started. It was true his syndicate required that amount. But he had conceived a sudden scheme for getting the balance from another source. He was very unwilling to commit himself to these blood-suckers for more than thirty thousand pounds; even that was a desperate expedient.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed, staring at her. "What do you know of my requirements?"

"Sir Melmoth Craven," she said quietly, "have you never seen the condor, the great vulture of South America which, though a mere speck in the sky, can see an ailing horse ten miles away, and be beside it when it staggers and drops? I, too, have a keen nose for carrion, and I know very well you are in a desperate state, financially. As to how I can tell you what sum you need—if I did not know these things I should never be head of Gordon's."

Craven sat back in his chair, his hands playing nervously with his cane. He wished himself well out of Gordon's. That this woman could know the well-kept secret of the Steinberg operations seemed impossible and dreadful.

"Have it as you will!" she said with a shrug. "Now, on these securities, as you know, you could raise nothing like the sum elsewhere. But I can deal with them. And if you take fifty thousand pounds, my investment will be the safer. I advise it. I shall draw you up two bonds separately—one for the smaller sum, one for the larger. You had best take both. The terms will be my own, and you can take them or leave them."

On two forms of stamped paper Mrs. Gordon wrote rapidly and at length, in her own hand, the terms on which the money was forthcoming. When finished, she handed them both to Craven.

He read them with care, and, at the end, muttered an oath. If anybody had told him a month ago he would even contemplate signing such papers, Craven would have thought the proposer mad. The immediate terms were not bad, but the penalty—and increase of interest for delay were terrible. He tried to argue with the woman, but was stopped dead.

"Yes or no!" she said calmly. "Other clients wait. It is all one to me, though I warn you, you will get nothing elsewhere. You can take the first cheque now."

"I will take the thirty thousand pounds, at least," he said, with sudden resolution. After all,

money in hand meant swift success. "Give me a pen!"

As he stooped to sign the first paper, Mrs. Gordon sat back, and idly took up in her yellow hand the cane that Craven had leaned against the desk, to examine it. It was a curious red-black wood, the handle covered with a clear, hard leather, very like catgut.

"You have been in South America, I see, Sir Melmoth," she said, in her thin voice. "A sangre cane, with handle of llama-hide, such as the Gaucho Indians make their whips of. I, too, have one here."

She struck twice with her hand a little bell that stood beside her, and at the same time she drew from a drawer a lithe Gaucho cutting-whip, and tossed it on to the table before Craven's face.

As the Gaucho whip clicked on the desk, Craven dropped his pen and stared at it. Slowly the colour left his cheeks, till he was livid as death.

"Does it recall a memory, Sir Melmoth?" asked Madame Vampire softly.

As she spoke, the two tall men who had lounged upon the staircase entered the room quietly and closed the door.

A dreadful fear dilated Craven's eyes as he peered at the woman who sat silent with the whip

before her. She lifted it, and drew the lash gently through her yellow fingers. Sir Melmoth shrank back quickly, to find the two guards between him and the door.

A malefactor, confronted suddenly with the evidence of his crime, could not have shown greater agitation than Craven. The sweat broke out on his forehead; for the first time his nerve seemed to desert him.

None of the other three moved or spoke. The men who had entered were as impassive as statues. Mrs. Gordon's eyes never left his face, and her forehead seemed to wrinkle with a faint surprise.

"Who are these men?" said Craven, as soon as he could find his voice.

"These men?" replied Mrs. Gordon, in the same impassive tone, tinged slightly with wonder. "They are employees of mine, Sir Melmoth. I have summoned them to witness your signature—a step both necessary and legal. Why should that agitate you?"

He drew a deep breath between his teeth. What he had expected Craven himself could hardly have told. Was the woman playing with him, and were her words a threat or a mockery?

"To witness my signature?" he echoed dully.

"Certainly. And they will do it at once."

The perspiration glistened on Sir Melmoth's brow.

"I—I have changed my mind," he muttered, controlling himself with an effort. "Your terms are too heavy."

"My terms are just terms," said the woman coldly. "Nor, with any resources that you have, can you obtain the money anywhere else in all England. That you know as well as I. Sign, then, or the fifty thousand pounds that you need is lost to you!"

Craven's jaw suddenly hardened. The money came before all. He must have it, whatever befell, or he and his companions would go down.

His signature on the bond was half finished; he had broken off in the very act of writing it. The golden bait lay before him, and, with sudden resolution, he took the pen and made the signature complete with a steady hand.

"And now the second bond also," said Mrs. Gordon. "You require it, and I require it of you."

Sir Melmoth hesitated. The woman leaned forward very slightly, looking him in the eyes, and tapped the second paper lightly with the end of the whip.

"Sign it, Sir Melmoth," she said, quietly.

An imperceptible shiver ran through Craven. He signed the second bond without a word.

"So. When a ship springs two leaks, a wise captain stops them both," said Mrs. Gordon.

She motioned to the two men, who, as Craven stepped back, both put their names to the two bonds as witnesses. Sir Melmoth saw at least one of the names as it was written. It conveyed nothing to him. Any one, if adult and sane, is valid as a witness to a bond.

Mrs. Gordon nodded to the men, and they left the room without a word. Neither of them had spoken since they entered it; they appeared to obey like machines.

Sir Melmoth drew a very deep, though unobtrusive breath of relief as they disappeared and the door closed behind them. The dew glistened on his forehead, and he was still pale. Mrs. Gordon was writing out a banker's draft. He turned to her with a sullen eye and a question hovering on his tongue. But she pushed the cheque across to him before he could speak.

"That draft is payable when the banks open tomorrow," she said. "You will ensure, therefore, that the remaining papers are in my hands before this evening. The bonds, of course, remain with me. One last word, Sir Melmoth. I keep faith with those who deal with me, and in return I exact the uttermost penny that is secured to me in black and white."

As she handed him the cheque, the Gaucho

whip was dislodged by the movement of her elbow. It rolled off the desk, and fell on the floor at her side. She looked up at Craven thoughtfully.

"I do not know," she said, "if I should apologise for having apparently caused you some slight emotion, Sir Melmoth. Your nerves appear to be a little shaken. It is the result of having lived in a subtropical climate."

It seemed to Sir Melmoth that the climate of that room was more than sub-tropical. His one desire was to get out of it, nor could he trust himself to say any more. Mrs. Gordon touched the bell beside her once.

"This is the limit of my dealings with you for the present," she said. "I have other clients waiting."

An attendant showed Craven out. He found himself in the street, hardly knowing how he got there. A passerby glanced curiously at his white face and dejected eyes, but Craven, striding onwards mechanically, neither saw him nor anything else.

A haunting vision was before him of a forest clearing in the Sierras on a day long gone by—a dream almost forgotten, but now coming back with a crimson clearness. And again he saw the whip so suddenly brought before his eyes in Madame Vampire's den.

Craven made his way to a saloon bar, and, or-

dering a stimulant of which he had never felt a greater need than at that moment, he sank back in a little corner lounge.

"Who is that woman?" he muttered. "Who is she, and what trap have I stepped into? I know her; and yet, for the life of me, I don't. She recalls something. There's some poise of the head or trick of speech that I've noticed before. Her eyes, too! And yet that yellow hag has never come into my life at all that I know of. No man could forget such a sight as she is. Who ever heard such a voice!"

Craven shivered.

"The girl's dead this twenty years!" he thought. Swiftly Sir Melmoth turned over in his mind the scene in the room again and again, and all the memories it led to. He would not admit, even to himself, the terror that had unmanned him at first. That seemed absurd now. But what was the meaning of it all? Was it blackmail?

"Or am I making a fool of myself?" he said, as the brandy dulled his taut-strung nerves. "The whole thing's ridiculous. An accident—a coincidence? Any one who knows the country would spot this llama-hide handle on my stick. She looks like a half-caste herself, the yellow harridan!"

He felt a strong impulse to tear up Madame

Vampire's draft and be done with the whole thing. She might still hold him on the signed bond. There were ways out of that if he did not use the money. But his hand stole to the folded cheque in his pocket, and that resolution was broken swiftly.

"We've got to have the money," he thought. "If our coup comes off, nothing else matters. And there's work to do, and no time to waste here."

He walked out, black care still sitting on his shoulders, for the event of the morning had thoroughly unhinged him. As he made his way down Lombard Street, trying to cast it from his mind but not succeeding, it suddenly came home to him afresh by the sight of Mrs. Gordon herself.

She was walking—a black, slightly bent figure—a hundred yards in front of him, threading her way through the foot traffic, a little leather bag in her hand. Craven slowed, and followed for some distance, unwilling to pass her. She moved at a slow, even pace, and, turning to the right, disappeared up Moorgate Street.

Craven walked on, thinking deeply, his brows knitted in an ugly frown. So absorbed was he that he was forced to step back sharply at the Mansion House crossing a few moments later, to avoid a large open car that slid by.

In the back seat, cold and proud, looking straight before her, sat Mrs. Enid Garth. She did not notice Craven. He let the car go by, and then went on at a quickened pace. The frown cleared from his brow, and he gave an impatient laugh.

"What mad ideas come into a man's head when he's strung up and overwrought! Enough of this folly. I'm becoming childish!"

He stopped a passing taxi-cab and returned westwards, casting a glance at Mrs. Garth's vanishing car as he got in.

"I have a score to settle with you!" he said softly. "Very cold and inaccessible you look—you and your millions. But you have a daughter," he added with a slow smile, "and of that, madam, I shall soon remind you!"

CHAPTER VII

THE IMPASSABLE BARRIER

At five in the afternoon of the day appointed John Orme presented himself at Berkeley Terrace, and was admitted.

"Mrs. Garth left word, sir," said the butler, "that if she should be a few minutes late, she hoped you would wait for her."

He showed Orme into a small, sunny drawing-room, in which Mrs. Garth received her friends—a charming room, with a colour scheme of autumn brown and old-gold.

Orme, left alone there, contrasted the room with his own bare apartments, and wondered vaguely what it would be like to live amid such surroundings of wealth and taste. There were one or two rare pictures, some priceless china, and the soft comfort of the place seemed to soothe mind and body into a dreamy peace.

All Mrs. Garth's rooms were like that. It had its effect on Orme, keenly sensitive to beauty in

any form, but he felt no touch of envy. The door opened again, and Margaret Garth herself came in.

A thrill of intense pleasure ran through Orme. He had hoped to find her, but his presence was evidently a surprise to Margaret. She was in a light tweed travelling costume, her face still pale; but a touch of colour tinged her cheeks, and she gave Orme a warmer welcome than he had had from her yet.

"Mr. Orme!" she said, as he took her hand. "You are waiting for my mother? I am so glad, for I wanted to see you. Let us have tea. I want it after my journey."

Orme felt an absurd happiness as he seated himself and let his eyes rest on the exquisite beauty of her face. He thought he knew the reason of her pallor, and was thankful to his soul that she could not guess at his knowledge.

"You have been away?" he said.

"At Selby for a day or two," she answered simply. "My mother wished me to stay; she thought me unwell. I've been riding and lazing; but it was dull, and I became restless. So I sent a wire today, and put myself on the train."

She gave an order to the servant who answered her ring.

"I feel that I must have something real to do, Mr. Orme, and I thought you might help me."

"Something to do!" he said. "I should have thought there was pleasure and excitement enough in your life to keep you very busy."

Margaret laughed.

"So there may be, and I take every bit I can get. But that's not all. I want different things. During the war I tried to do what a girl could—little enough, but it was work. Now that's done. It was hard to give it up, but I don't need money, and it is not for me to fill the place of any man or woman who does. You, though, of all people, cannot check me for wanting to be busy! You do the work of three men!"

She looked at his strong, handsome face and the well-poised head and the crisp, fair hair—the sense of power and protection that he gave. Orme, without knowing it, gave that feeling to many women. He was so good to look upon—so straight and clean—and in his eyes the latent power to command.

There was in Margaret now a deep sense of respect, for the first time, which would have embarrassed Orme badly had he guessed at it. She had learned at Selby the true story of his V.C.

"How is it," she said, "that you, who have done your share, and have a right to ease and prosperity,

can turn your back on all that and fight day and night in the House and on the platform? You are the most serious person I know."

Orme laughed heartily.

"Serious? I?" he said. "What a curious idea! I am like you—I can do with all the sport and all the joy of life that comes my way. Some of my followers think me frivolous because I play Rugby football; and I hunt whenever a friend will stand me a mount. It's true I haven't time to make money. That may come. At present, the iron has entered my soul. I've seen England as she is, and I can tell you she is almost sick to death!"

He rose from his seat.

"Miss Margaret, the world you know is Mayfair and the shires. It is a fair world enough, and it fits you. You do not know the underworld! The slums where tens of thousands live and die in darkness. Where men and women with the faces of rats live the lives of rats; whose children, from their first days, fight a losing battle with the devils of foul dwellings, disease and vice!

"Those who survive can do little but fill the casual-wards and the gaols. There are folk who say that England is great and healthy now. How can a body be healthy when it has a canker like that, deep down?

"And it is swelling, growing. The discontent rises daily. It is there the danger lies. There are men who, for their own purposes, are fanning the flame, and hope soon to turn the rats loose upon the granary! It has been done in Russia, and it may happen here. If you saw the misery that exists even in London, you would hardly wonder. We shall deserve the trouble when it comes."

Margaret looked grave.

"It does sound fearful! But if there is such misery, what is the cause?" she said.

"The cause? Greed! The growing rich, who clutch and claw as if they had nothing—the sweaters and the exploiters of the poor. The obstructionists, who stand in reform's way, the slum landlords, and a thousand others. There are men who try to corner the wheat supplies; there are scoundrels today cornering one of the most famous drugs fatal to disease, and fattening on the profits that the poor must pay. All these feed the underworld and help it to increase."

"But why?" asked Margaret. "Have not those destitute people always existed, and are they not growing fewer?"

"No! They are recruited from above every day. They die by scores, but hundreds fill their places. The honest, thrifty poor stand on so small

a margin of safety that a stroke of bad luck to a working family—illness, loss of a job, increase of rent or food prices that lead to debt—all these at any moment drop a man suddenly into the dregs of humanity—the submerged tenth of the slums. Easier for a man to pull himself out of the bottomless pit. The rich man goes bankrupt, and starts again. Not so the poor man."

"Not if he is a man, with a man's will and strength?"

"Those do not always stand against starvation. And if he falls, what chance have his children? My own parents were poor, though thrifty and straight. What if a trick of fate had thrust them across the borderline? I never see a trembling thief dragged to the police station without thinking: 'There, but for the grace of God, goes John Orme!'"

He tried to change the subject, but Margaret persisted.

"Tell me of these things—you, who know. I wish to understand," she said. "Do you mean that you have seen men and women starving in London? I though such things were of the past—that the poor-laws and all our charities had relieved them."

Orme looked at her in wonder. And since she

asked him, he told her of what he had seen in London. Of families packed together in noisome dens, of men and women whose minds and bodies become as vile as their surroundings, of children neglected till they were living skeletons; of other children, again, familiar with crime and horror from babyhood. His eyes shone, and he spoke like a man inspired.

And then, suddenly, Orme stopped dead. He saw that Margaret did not understand. The girl was deeply stirred, but to realise the truth was beyond her.

Orme looked at her in silence. He remembered her on the night of the ball, dressed tastefully yet superbly, with pearls that were worth a king's ransom about her white throat. He remembered the life she led, and her mother's millions.

Margaret Garth could no more realise the lives of the poor than could the great ladies of the Court before the French Revolution. It was the impassable barrier.

A maid entered the room, swift, silent, and respectful. She spread dainty trifles on an old Sheraton table. Margaret looked at Orme with troubled eyes.

"I feel that I cannot realise all this," she said. "And I know that I ought! The sheltered life I

lead is my loss. Where are these places—in the East End?"

"There are many," said Orme. "One of the worst, which I know well, is at Woolwich. The Ash Pit, it is called."

"I will see it for myself," said Margaret, her eyes shining with quick resolution. "I will go there with you. Will you take me?"

Orme stared at her.

"Do you mean it?" he said.

"Certainly I mean it! It is right that I should understand. I am an Englishwoman, and these are my countrymen. I ask you to take me."

"I will do anything you ask me!" said Orme quickly. "And perhaps it would be well that you should know. Certainly, you will be perfectly safe with me. I know the place thoroughly. I've taken many people there."

"Then it is settled! When are you free, Mr. Orme? Shall we say Friday? Dine with us here. The car will take us down; then we can leave it and walk."

The maid left the room. Margaret, whose cheeks were brightly flushed, busied herself with tea. But a cold wave of doubt broke over Orme, and he began to regret having consented.

"Look here, Miss Garth," he said. "I feel this

is a mistake. You are not fit for it. I hate to think of you in connection with such things. Forget what I have said."

"Ah," she broke in, "you cannot back out now! You have promised! I shall hold you to it. I tell you that I am determined. If you do not take me, then I shall go with someone else, or by myself. That is certain."

"Well, if you are set upon it, I obey," he said. "Of course, provided Mrs. Garth allows me. I was foolish to talk to you of these things. Not that there's the remotest danger. Will you wear a plain dress and a veil, and bring no money, if you don't mind? Small doles on the spot are worse than useless, and would surround you with beggars."

"I shall do exactly as you tell me," she said. "For the rest, I know mother will not stand in my way. Why, here she is!"

Margaret sprang up as Mrs. Garth came in, greeting her daughter affectionately, and chiding her for coming back so soon. The hostess shook hands with Orme, and was at once informed by Margaret of the appointment for Woolwich.

Mrs. Garth looked at her daughter thoughtfully.

"I see no harm in it," she said quietly. "I have seen the darker side of life, but you have not. It

might be the better for you. I shall not prevent you, Margaret, if you are determined upon it; and I prefer you to go with someone who knows what they are about. I can trust you not to let her see too much, Mr. Orme."

"You can rely on that," he said. "But——"

"Mr. Orme wished to back out of it," Margaret said, "but I hold him to his promise." She left them together.

Mrs. Garth disposed of the appointment briefly, and turned to Orme with new earnestness.

"I read your speech in the House," she said. "Your facts are absolutely right. You have exposed a crime! A small ring of financiers are organising a 'corner' in quinine and morphine, two drugs of which there is a deadly need just now. They have got their clutches on the world's supplies, and they expect enormous profits from forced prices."

"They've chosen their time well," said Orme, grimly. "There were great stocks held by the Army abroad, that have been destroyed—how, who knows? And the rest of the supplies have now been grabbed at the source. With the influenza plague on foot again, and people dying in hundreds. As for the morphia, that will be passed through—at a price—to the fools who use

it, in order that a ring of knaves may make a quarter of a million! I say a rope and the lamp-post is the desert of such as they, if one could trace them!"

"Let me tell you something," said Mrs. Garth, quietly. "I have every reason to believe the operators are the Steinberg Syndicate, and Craven their chief factor."

Orme turned to her swiftly.

"Can you prove it?" he exclaimed. "I have suspected it strongly; if I had proof, I could deal with Craven!"

"Proof is impossible, as yet. The principals have covered themselves far too well; you would only break yourself if you tried. But I will tell you something else, Mr. Orme."

She laid a hand on his sleeve, and lowered her voice.

"I have taken steps within the last two days that will throw down the whole operation—if it is not too late. I will break that corner, and the ring with it, though it should cost me a hundred thousand!"

"But this is magnificent!" exclaimed Orme. "You will be a benefactor to the nation. There is no one else who could do it. You believe you will succeed?"

"That, I shall know within twenty-four hours. Remember, this is in the strictest confidence. You are fighting on the right side, and I trust you. No one must know it outside this room. Fight on, then—and come to me at eight on Friday. By then—I shall name the winner!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE BLOW FALLS

"I WOULD give ten years of my life," said Mr. Steinberg, gloomily, "if we had never touched this accursed operation. Gentleman, before the clock strikes four, we shall know our fate."

The most depressed ring of financiers in London had assembled in Craven's rooms. The stout Steinberg himself appeared to be on the verge of tears; the palms of his hands waved in eloquent protest against fate. Sir Melmoth was sullen-eyed and savage. A third member of the brotherhood, Señor Ruy Culebra—a saddle-coloured South American—muttered to himself and looked as vicious as a snake.

There was a fourth man present, who sat absolutely silent and unmoved. He was the youngest there, barely thirty-three, and a dark, aquiline face and beaked nose that suggested some brooding bird of prey. He was not unattractive, well and neatly dressed, his slender hands perfectly mani-

cured; but his dark eyes were watchful and keen. His name was Ducros.

"The thing has been bungled!" growled the South American.

"By you, Culebra, with the shipping business and the infernal delay!" snapped Sir Melmoth.

"Caramba! I say it is rather you who have failed us!" hissed Culebra, "with your brag about your great financial interests, and your social power that should clear the way for us!"

Craven turned on him fiercely, and a quarrel seemed imminent, but Steinberg interposed.

"For goodness' sake don't let us fall out among ourselves!" he pleaded. "That way lies worse ruin yet. No, it is from outside that our enemies have come. See this!"

He picked up a newspaper that lay on the table.

"See this speech by that young scoundrel, Orme? You have read it? 'The Scandal of the Drug Corner.' A column of red-hot attack, and some of the points in it are deadly. He has been goading the Government to interfere. The *Daily Mail* has taken it up."

"Oh, Culebra, my dear boy," said Steinberg, in broken tones, "what a disgusting piece of British hypocrisy! Why should one not make a corner in quinine, and such things? It is a legiti-

mate business proposition. With the epidemic in force, and all. A fairer chance could never happen in fifty years. The main stocks destroyed; the source of supplies in our hands. Our agents have done splendidly. And we break in on this young Orme!"

Sir Melmoth made an impatient gesture.

"Throw that rag in the fireplace, and don't talk rubbish," he retorted. "Orme has been a nuisance, and I will see him repaid. But that would never have defeated us. I don't fear a penniless windbag. It is those successive hammer-blows in the financial world, struck by a giant hand, that have brought us down."

"First, the crash in Westerns, and now this shipping blow; the throwing of drug stocks we never suspected upon the market at knock-out prices," said Culebra bitterly. "Whoever the enemy is, it will cost them thousands. It's not business, but sheer malice. How did your hopes of Garth's support fail, Craven?"

"What's the use of going into that?" said Sir Melmoth suavely. "I told you my plans. My chances were excellent, so were my credentials. To make sure, I carried the first line of defence, which was the woman's daughter—always my strongest card. It succeeded perfectly. A better

coup for me than even our little corner, my friends. And then, by a trick of fate, it all went smash. The Garth woman has some grudge against me. I suspect her, in spite of you all, as being the chief cause of our failure."

The others were silent. Steinberg shrugged his shoulders.

"And one word on that!" said Craven, striking the table. "Stand or fall, I will endure no reproaches, for I have done more than any of you! When the thing began to fail, I tackled Garth's; when it became desperate, I got you the £50,000 from Gordon's!

"Now falls this last undreamed-of blow, by which we stand to lose double. I wish to know who dealt that blow. I say it is Garth's, and I must have the proof which you failed to get!"

"I do not believe it is Garth's," said Steinberg, obstinately.

"That we shall see. I have sent for Natalie Page, and I'm expecting her now."

"I'll bet you are!" murmured Steinberg, with a slight smile; and his eye met Culebra's.

"You may not know Natalie as well as I," said Craven, "but one of you at least is aware that she is the cleverest business and social spy in London. Ears that are in her pay hear most curious things,

and she is absolutely reliable. I think that is her step on the stair."

A manservant entered and said something to Sir Melmoth, who nodded. A girl was shown into the room, dressed in neat black. She might have been twenty-seven, or a little older. She was attractive, even beautiful, but with a slightly sinister cast of features which was curiously like that of one of the men who sat in the room—the silent Ducros. She had the same dark and watchful eye.

The girl gave a faint nod to Ducros, took no notice of the other two, and seated herself opposite Sir Melmoth without a word. Her hard eyes softened; there was a strange, almost dog-like devotion in them as they met his.

"Well, Natalie," said Sir Melmoth softly, "any news?"

"As regards Garth's Bank," said the girl, who spoke perfect English with but a slightly foreign intonation, "I have failed completely. The place is as solid as a fortress. I have tried personally two of the cashiers who should know something—but there was nothing doing. I cannot, of course, get any one of my own inside the place. But at Mrs. Garth's house, I have had better luck."

She paused. Craven and Culebra listened eagerly.

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"There is a maid in that house who is in my pay. She has had her instructions. For some time past, she has found nothing out that would be of any use to you, until last night. Now I can give you this: Mrs. Garth is operating against your Steinberg Syndicate. She is using all her resources to upset —a certain great gamble in drugs, or some such thing. And she cares not what it costs her."

Craven sprang to his feet.

"I knew it!" he said with an oath. "Here is the truth at last! How was it discovered, Natalie?"

"By a few scraps of a conversation overheard; which I was able to piece together, knowing what I do," replied the girl. "It is quite certain. The conversation—it was between Mrs. Garth and John Orme, the M.P., who was visiting her."

"Orme and Garth's Bank!" groaned Steinberg. "Their whole weight in the scale! You were right, Craven! It is we, and not the drug market, who are cornered!"

"I wish I had them both in a certain place we know of!" said Craven between his teeth. "Anything more, Natalie?"

"No—unless this is of importance. Orme is quite plainly in love with the daughter, Margaret Garth. I think you know it already. And he is coming to the house tomorrow night, and will

take the girl on a slumming visit to the Ash Pit at Woolwich, after eight in the evening. I have the very time and place—the maid was in the room when it was arranged."

The information did not seem to interest the others much, but a curious flash came into Ducros' eyes. Sir Melmoth's rage at finding his belief confirmed overmastered all other emotions.

"After all," he said suddenly, "we do not know yet that she has won. You may go, Natalie—you have done well. I will see you later on."

The girl left quietly. The four men began to discuss the affair stormily, but Natalie had scarcely quitted the house when Craven's man brought in a telegram, on a tray, and departed again. Craven tore the envelope open, scanned the words, and flung the form to his companions with a bitter curse.

"Down and out!" he snarled. "The corner's broken, the market's flooded. We're finished beyond all help!"

The other men clutched at the paper. Steinberg buried his face in his hands.

"All we had on earth!" he said, with a sob. "And £100,000 beyond it!"

Culebra swore violently in Spanish, his hands trembling. Ducros gave no sign beyond a tiny

shrug of his shoulders. Craven was almost beside himself.

"That accursed woman," he said, choking, "who set her on me? What is her reason? I am not a fool, to believe the cant she talked! I know no more of her than she does of me! Who is Mrs. Garth? What were her beginnings?"

"I, at least, can tell you that," said the fourth member of the syndicate.

All three turned with one accord to the hitherto silent Ducros.

"Then why have you not?" exclaimed Sir Melmoth.

"You never asked me, that I know of. It is not common knowledge—the earlier part of it. But Mrs. Garth, before her marriage with the heir of the bank, lived obscurely at Rio Gordo with her brother, who died in that country. Her name was Enid Trelawne."

Sir Melmoth turned deadly white. The rage in his eyes changed to terror. He left his companions and walked unsteadily to the window.

"Rio! Enid Trelawne," he muttered between dry lips. "Great powers, is this true?"

The muscles of his face worked.

"A fool's love affair—a hunt for money—and a little hour of pastime in the hills. Vengeance!

And now it comes back to strike me down—after twenty years! Enid of Rio. Enid Garth! She is the woman on whom I laid the Gaucho whip at Caragua!"

Steinberg and Culebra stared at their partner in astonishment. They were at a loss to account for Craven's behaviour. His emotion was only too evident. His back was towards them, but he was shaking visibly.

"Carajo! What is the matter with you, Melmoth?" growled Culebra. "This information of Ducros', is it anything to the point?"

Craven mastered himself with a great effort. He turned and faced Culebra.

"No," he said briefly. "It is nothing. It does not help us."

"Are you sure?" asked Steinberg, watching him keenly. "You seemed a little upset, my dear boy. It is best we should have no secrets among ourselves."

"I tell you it is nothing!" said Craven sullenly. He returned to the table, and flung himself heavily into a chair. "What does it matter? What does anything matter? We have made the last throw, and lost. We are ruined—broken!"

A grim silence followed his words. There was despair in the eyes of the three men. They looked

at each other as if seeking some ray of hope, but hope there was none, Craven had accurately described the situation.

"Gentlemen," said Ducros quietly, "I do not agree with you."

The three chiefs turned a questioning glance upon Ducros—Ducros of the dark, hawk-like face, and watchful eyes. The man who said so little, yet saw farther than any of them.

"I could not dispute with three such masters of finance," pursued Ducros; "but I hold the opinion very strongly that we still hold the whip-hand. Shall I speak?"

"Yes," said Culebra, with an oath.

Craven became attentive, but Steinberg, meeting Ducros eyes, looked frightened.

"Listen, then," said Ducros. "We have made a big bid for a big stake, and failed. We are 'down the drain,' as you say in this country, for nearly a hundred thousand pounds. Is that the sum? Very well. But if we could get hold of a hundred thousand pounds, we should find not only our salvation, but come out of it, even with profit. That is to say, you would. Am I right?"

"If!" growled the South American.

"Agreed. Who, then, do we know who has a great deal of money? Mrs. Enid Garth, of Garth's

Bank. What has Mrs. Garth that is worth a hundred thousand pounds to her?" He paused, and leaned slightly forward. "Her daughter."

Craven stifled an exclamation. His narrow eyes were shining as he listened.

"Gentlemen," said Ducros softly, "what an exquisite thing is a mother's love! What delicious sacrifices can it not be led to make! An only daughter, a maiden, and an heiress of the richest! And where, as we have learned, does Margaret Garth go tomorrow night, with one man as her escort? To the Ash Pit at Woolwich. Gentlemen, the Fates play into our hands. Shall we not have the courage and the brains to profit?"

"Yes. Go on man!" said Craven eagerly. The others were listening intently.

"It is," said Ducros, "a different class of operation to those in which you have been engaged, but it is much more in my line. I prefer the direct effort. In all London there is no easier place to put any one away than the Ash Pit. I know it, gentlemen, as well as I used to know the La Vilette quarter of Paris. I have many friends and resources there. Sir Melmoth also has some acquaintance with the place.

"Briefly, then, my plan is that Mrs. Garth's daughter should be delivered into the hands of

certain gentlemen of the Ash Pit, which can be easily arranged, and I would defy the united police of London to trace her. Mrs. Garth will then be given the choice of paying the sum required within a few hours for the return of her daughter—after we have done with her.

"The alternative," added Ducros, "will be so extremely unpleasant for Mademoiselle Margaret that you need not fear a refusal. Mrs. Garth is the one woman living who would pay immediately, and in such a way that we shall be safe."

The three partners stared at each other in silence. Craven was twitching with excitement and impatience.

"Dios! What a plan!" muttered Culebra, with dry lips. "Who is to do it?"

"I will," replied Ducros calmly. "You may leave it in my hands. It's the only chance you have of saving yourselves."

"It's madness; it's far too dangerous!" babbled Steinberg, in scared tones. "I will have no share in such a business. Discovery would mean the gaol, or worse."

"Listen to me," said Ducros abruptly. "I shall take the risk, not you. I am willing. Observe gentlemen, I joined this syndicate of yours as a very junior member, and had less to lose. I've

carried out your orders without a flaw, and served you well. Is it not so? I saw my way of making what is to me a considerable sum as my share.

"All that is now what you call a wash-out. To throw away this opportunity would be folly. I cannot do it without your agreement and some help. I will get you the hundred thousand pounds. In the event of success I require twenty thousand pounds as my share. No more, no less. In return for that, assured and in hand, I am ready to face a term of penal servitude should I be caught.

"I am young, and I should be able at length to retire from this somewhat precarious profession, and spend the rest of my life in affluence. I lay my cards on the table, gentlemen. Give me three hundred pounds for working expenses, and to-morrow night I will deal with Orme—perhaps, with Margaret Garth—to a certainty."

"I believe it might be done," said Culebra frowning, "but——"

"No, it is too dangerous!" exclaimed Steinberg. "What guarantee have we——"

"Stop!" interrupted Craven, rising. "Let us consider. Ducros, I have confidence in you, and I think your plan masterly. It appeals to me. Will you leave us a few minutes, and we shall decide?"

Ducros nodded, and withdrew. Sir Melmoth turned to his partners.

"Steinberg," he said swiftly, "let us have no beating about the bush. This thing must go through. Ducros can be relied on absolutely. He will make good. I am for it. We must save ourselves!"

"Man, if he is caught, he will betray us!" stammered Steinberg.

"It is the one thing on earth he will never do. I know Ducros better than I know any man living, and I will give you his history in a few words. He is the son of a French father and an English mother, and has one of the most extraordinary records in Paris. There is not a cleverer fellow alive.

"He was a leader of apaches in La Vilette, but for five years has been resident in England, and his traces are so cleverly covered that the police of neither Paris nor London have now any idea of his identity here. He is, none the less, a master-mind among the lower strata of what is called by fools the underworld."

"I did not know this," murmured Culebra, "though I have a shrewd idea he is the brother of that girl, Natalie Latour, if that's her name."

"You are perfectly right. And a particularly

useful pair they are—in their place. There's one invaluable point about Ducros, which is this—he has never betrayed a confederate who dealt squarely by him, no matter what the cost to himself. And I dare swear to it he never will. He is utterly fearless and as stoical as a Red Indian. We must act squarely by Ducros, and he'll stand by us. He's announced himself ready to do this job, and he will do it.

"Now," concluded Craven firmly, "I am for it, and say it shall be done. You agree? Will you face the world, ruined and discredited, or leave it to Ducros and me?"

"I am with you!" said Culebra quickly. "Carry it out!"

Steinberg hid his face in his hands, and groaned.

"I dare not think about it!" he muttered. "But if it's got to be, I'll not stand in your way."

Craven opened the door and summoned Ducros.

"We agreed, Ducros," said Sir Melmoth. "Your plan is good, and we have no choice. Go on with it."

"I must know more about it, though," said Culebra. "There are great difficulties, and I cannot see how——"

"For my part," interrupted Steinberg hastily, "I wish to hear nothing of it!"

"Mr. Steinberg is right," said Ducros quietly. "There is nothing to be gained by chattering about it here. Leave it to me. I shall inform Sir Melmoth in the morning, when I have arranged details, and I shall need a little help from him. I will not fail. Directly the money is in my hands it must be passed on to you, for fear it should be recovered. There is one thing more."

Ducros placed his hands on the table and faced the three.

"If, after the girl has been taken," he said softly, "and there is any real danger of a recapture and a show-up, then there is but one thing possible. An immediate finish, and the wiping out of the evidence. You understand? It is the safest way, and I will have it so."

Steinberg shivered.

"You mean—" he said hoarsely, and the words stuck in his throat.

Ducros nodded.

"Yes," he said, "I mean that."

Craven licked his thin lips and moved nearer Ducros.

"If it comes to that, Ducros," he whispered, "and you find the game is really up, I ask one thing only. Give me half an hour alone with her —just half an hour with the evidence—before you

make the finish; or as much time as you can spare."

Ducros' mouth twisted into a curious smile, and he gave a little shrug.

"I can manage that for you, if you keep in close touch with me," he replied. "There will be several things to arrange. And now, gentlemen, I will leave you. Have no doubts. Before tomorrow night Margaret Garth will be in our hands."

CHAPTER IX

THE ASH PIT

ORME stood in the wide entrance-hall of Mrs. Garth's house; the butler helped him deftly into his overcoat, and handed him his hat. The dinner, with its light and laughter, was over. Margaret came down the stairs, dressed and ready. She wore a plain dark fawn cloak and a small toque of black straw.

"Will this do?" she said.

Orme looked at the lovely, challenging face for a few moments before answering.

"I should suggest a thicker veil," he answered.

"If you like," she said, laughing. "You know best. Wait for me a few minutes."

As the girl returned upstairs, Mrs. Garth came into the hall superbly dressed, carrying herself with a quiet confidence and pride. She looked younger, and there was a faint flush on her cheeks.

"Do not be too long over this," she said, taking Orme aside. "You can be back by eleven?"

"Easily. We will give the whole business up, Mrs. Garth, if you care to say the word. I am afraid you may be disquieted——"

"No, no! I would not disappoint Margaret; and, as I said, it will be a good thing for her. None of our name have ever feared knowledge."

She laid a hand on his sleeve.

"Mr. Orme, there has been news this evening that I preferred to keep till I saw you alone." She lowered her voice. "Craven and his agents are finished, and at my mercy. The corner is broken!"

"News, indeed!" said Orme under his breath. "This is splendid! But I expected it. I knew you would not fail."

"In the morning, Mr. Orme, I will put into your hands information that will give you a sure weapon. The snake's back is broken, but we shall crush it finally. Come to me at the bank at eleven."

Margaret reappeared in a veil that hid her features almost entirely. She jested about it as she bade a humorous farewell to her mother, and a few minutes later Margaret and Orme were spinning eastwards in a large closed car that had been waiting at the door.

"The adventure at last!" said Margaret gaily.

"You are in command, and I've obeyed your orders."

"I didn't want you to be recognised," said Orme. "You are well known. Things leak out into the papers in a wonderful way. I should hate that to happen to you; and it would annoy Mrs. Garth."

"Public men do fear the Press," said Margaret a little maliciously. "Is this your car?"

"It belongs to a friend of mine. It was better than using yours. The chauffeur knows the district we are going to, and will make no mistakes."

The car sped swiftly through the half-deserted streets, reached the Embankment at Westminster, and crossed the river at Blackfriars. The dingy world of South London closed around it, and the driver headed steadily eastwards.

The journey, even at such a speed, was a long one. It seemed short enough to Orme. An intoxication of pleasure filled him as he sat by Margaret's side in the gloom.

She asked him many questions, gaily at first; but when Mayfair was left behind, and the dark streets of Slumland were entered, she seemed to grow more silent and earnest, as if a shadow oppressed her.

Apart from the girl's presence the expedition was little to Orme's taste. He feared nothing

from it, save its possible effect upon Margaret, and he promised himself that the stay in Woolwich should be as brief as he could make it.

The car drew up at last, and they stepped out into a dim, gas-lit street that seemed entirely deserted. Orme gave some instructions to the driver, and, asking Margaret to keep close at his side, set out on foot.

They turned into a bye-street. At the next corner a constable, standing silently by the wall, peered at Orme, made a semi-salute, and looked curiously at the veiled girl beside him. They passed on, walking rapidly, and after a couple of minutes entered a long, dark alley.

Here there was life, and from one of the houses the sound of a shrill, cracked laughter. In every doorway a dim figure sat or crouched. The next alley had houses—grimy and two-storeyed—on one side only, with a high, black wall opposite. There were lights in many of the windows. Orme stopped at an open door.

A woman dressed in tawdry rags came out and slunk away.

"There is time to draw back," said Orme hopefully. "You are determined on this?"

"I am here to learn," said Margaret seriously. "Show me the worst that is to be seen."

Orme shook his head briefly.

"You don't know what you ask," he said; and led the way in.

There was a black, broken stair, and on the right a door. A stunted boy, who had been lurking inside, greeted Orme eagerly, and received a kindly word. Rapping at the door Orme looked in for a few minutes, and signed to Margaret to enter.

Many a remarkable room had the girl seen, but never one like that. Even the odour of it smote upon her nostrils like a blow. The two broken panes of the grimy window could not relieve the atmosphere.

It was not easy at first to realise the details, for there was no light, save that from a solitary wall street-lamp outside in the alley. A long bench of planks, resting on boxes, was the first thing visible. It was littered with piles of little chip baskets, such as cress and fruit are sold in. Behind was a great mass of the shavings from which they were made.

At the bench was a woman, clad in rags, and sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. She was seated on a packing-case; her head rested on her arms, that were stretched out among the little chip boxes.

A newsboy of ten or twelve, with a little white, drawn face, was sleeping on the floor near her, a couple of old papers covering his rags like a rough counterpane.

At the other side of the room lay a family of four—a man, a woman, and two children—huddled together on the bare boards. The dirt of the room was beyond imagination.

"That woman," said Orme quietly, "by making chip-boxes for fourteen hours a day, and with the help of her son's earnings, can just earn enough to keep life in her—of the kind you see. Her husband, I believe, is in the hospital. The other family merely shares the room. Shall I wake her and let you hear her story?"

"In pity's name let her sleep!" whispered Margaret; and with trembling hands felt for the pocket of her cloak. Orme, seeing that one of the sleepers stirred, led Margaret outside quickly.

"One word," he said earnestly, "do not yourself attempt to give anything, whatever you may see. You will do no good, and might run into serious trouble. Your mother has given much money, we are relieving as fast as we can, and these streets have not been reached. I shall return after you are home again, and relieve the worst cases. You wish to go on? Come, then!"

In the next twenty minutes, Margaret visited three or four rooms in various houses of that dreadful human warren, and saw and heard things till then undreamed of. The rat-like beings that lived there, the burden of want, vice, and disease that lay upon them, the hopelessness and pitilessness of it all, came home at last to her swift understanding, and smote her to the heart. Nor, by a long margin, did Orme let her see the worst.

In one dreadful apartment, where some worked while others slept like hogs, a terrible old wrinkled hag stared at Margaret for a moment, and led her to the window.

"You will find this 'interesting,' don't you?" grinned the woman, showing her toothless gums. "Look yonder over the houses. There are thousands such as this, where we crawl and die. See those places where the light flares? Every one a drink-house. It's that keeps us alive—till it kills us. How could we stick it, else? Some day, though, we may come west an' wake you up. It ain't for want of askin'!"

She touched Margaret on the arm.

"I was a gentlewoman myself once. Look at me now! What brings you here, to spend an evening in Hell, little lady? You were a fool to come!"

Orme interposed, and brought Margaret out—how, she scarcely knew. A young man sidled up to them.

"Old Mrs. McGee has struck it awful bad, sir," he said in an undertone. "The kid——"

"I will come in an hour," interposed Orme. "I am leaving now."

"No!" said Margaret shivering. "Let us go on. I will drink this to the dregs, and then I shall know what I have to do! It is a woman that wants help."

"Come, then!" replied Orme abruptly. "This shall be the last."

In the next house, on the upper floor, they went into a room where a woman sat making match-boxes. There was pile upon pile of them; each bore the name of an English firm. Her fingers worked like a machine, her face was the face of death itself; her eyes were terrible as the pallid skin stretched over her cheek-bones.

"Your husband?" asked Orme quickly.

"Comes out termorrer!" answered the woman dully. "He will find—that!"

She jerked her head towards a long orange-box, in which lay what seemed to be the form of a child, covered with a dirty black cloth.

"Died s'afternoon!" added the woman, with

dry, staring eyes. While she spoke her fingers never ceased to form and paste up the match-boxes. "'Nother in the nex' room—not much better. Goin' under, I think. Me too. Money went in chemist's stuff. No food terday!"

Margaret looked from the woman to the box, and swayed slightly, as though she would fall. Orme, a lump in his throat, supported her and led her out.

"I will see you directly," he said over his shoulder to the woman.

Margaret revived a little outside, but hardly knew where she was till they had left two passages behind and were at the head of the stairs.

"Let me go!" she gasped. "I will try to help now. I must!"

She left Orme before he could stop her, and flitted back swiftly down the passages to the room they had left. The match-box maker had risen to her feet.

Margaret put a hand inside her cloak and tore from the bosom of her dress a little gold brooch, with pearls in the centre.

"Take this!" she said brokenly, thrusting it into the woman's hand. "It is all I have. Sell it —buy food. I will come tomorrow——"

"Gawd bless yer, lidy!" muttered the woman,

slipping deftly between Margaret and the door, striking the wall twice with her hand. "If there was more like you——"

As Margaret turned, an inner door of the room opened, and a dark, hawk-faced man sprang swiftly upon her from behind. A cloth, drenched with a sweet and sickly smell, was clapped over her face as she struggled, and in less than three seconds she was dragged into the inner room. A young woman, supple and keen-eyed, was waiting there, and sprang to help the man.

"Thought we'd have to out the chap!" said Ducros, for it was he. "Look sharp, Nat!"

"This way's better. The luck's with us. Hold her, and let me get those things, you fool!" said Natalie. "I'll give you an hour's start!"

With deft hands she tore the cloak from Margaret, flung it on herself, clapped the toque and veil on her head, and darted through into the outer room and the passage, where she collided with Orme, returning in haste. She caught at him with trembling hands.

"Take me back!" she said, with a broken sob, her voice scarcely audible. "Get me away from this!"

Orme halted at the open door, and feeling the tremor of the little hands that clutched him, heard

the girl's voice hoarse and wrung with emotion. He caught her arm, and, turning sharply, made her walk back with him at a rapid rate down the dark passage.

"Come!" he said, almost harshly. "Let us leave all this behind. There has been too much of it!"

His companion made no answer as he hurried her from the building and out through the tortuous alleys to the open street beyond. His one obsession was to get away from the vile warren and everything connected with it.

Margaret's impulsive desertion of him and her return to the fatal room had struck him with a shock of anxiety. He had turned to follow her, bewildered, and uncertain for a few moments which way she had gone. A half-drunken man had lurched out of another room and blundered into Orme, causing some seconds of delay. When at last he did find the girl, her distress of mind was so evident that there was only one thing to be done. It was no place for explanations.

The free air blowing in their faces as they reached the street was some relief after the noisome breath of the Ash Pit. Orme, a deep frown on his face, walked swiftly, and the veiled figure, with bowed head, moved beside him in silence.

The girl seemed to be crying softly, and the sound cut Orme to the heart.

"Try and forget it!" he said. "This expedition has been folly. It is my fault, and I only hope you can forgive me. Here is the car. Please get in."

He held open the door for her, and as she entered he called to the driver:

"Back to Berkeley Terrace, and drive as fast as you dare!"

Orme got in, and turned to the girl as the car drove off. She had shrunk back into the corner, her veiled face turned away, and she held up a hand in piteous entreaty for silence, as though she could not bear to be spoken to as yet. He could feel her shoulders shaking gently.

Orme looked quietly at the dim figure, and leaned back with a sigh. Anything that he could say would only sound banal and useless. It was best to let her be.

He blamed himself bitterly for the entire business. Why had he not been firm, and refused to take her? A man's perceptions and emotions are not so keen as a woman's. He was used to that nightmare country they were leaving behind; Margaret was not.

What a fool he had been! Sights and sounds

that naturally would tear the heart of a sensitive girl, appealed chiefly to Orme's brain and his reason. True, there was in him, as in all reformers, another side to his nature—the inborn trace of a woman's soul—the instinct to pity and to heal. But in Margaret, he realised, the heart came first. He could not feel as she did.

Orme looked through the window at the dark houses that seemed to speed by, and asked himself vaguely—was it for good or ill? She had sought for knowledge, and found it. For an hour, the lives of the hopeless poor had been brought home to the rich. But——

Orme cast the thought from him impatiently. Pain and suffering had been brought to the girl he loved. No outcast in London at that moment was in keener distress of mind than she.

The young reformer's sense of democracy was in danger. At that moment he could have sunk the Ash Pit and its slaves the fathoms deep for just one thing—the right to take her in his arms and comfort her, to claim her for his own. The thought thrilled Orme to his soul. It was the one thing earth denied him.

The happiness of the onward journey was no longer his. He turned his head to look quietly at Margaret. A strange uneasiness, which he

could not account for, crept through him. She looked broken and forlorn. One hand pressed a little handkerchief to her eyes, over the thick veil that he had insisted on her wearing. A small pearl ring gleamed faintly on the hand, as the light of a street lamp shone for a moment upon it.

The thought strayed into Orme's mind that he had not seen her wearing that ring before. He had asked her to wear no jewellery at all. He did not know of the brooch that had been concealed by her cloak. However, probably she had worn gloves earlier, that concealed the ring. He could not remember. It was a trifle, but it persisted in his mind as trifles do when a man is filled with conflicting thoughts, and matters have gone ill with him.

Orme could only respect her silence, and be silent himself. To try to talk to her might bring about a breakdown. The journey seemed long enough, but the car travelled at high speed, and at last turned into Berkeley Terrace. As it entered that well-known street, the girl lowered her hand and touched his arm.

"Please set me down before we reach the house," she said in a low, stifled voice, that still trembled with tears. "I will go back by myself. Do not come with me. I—I wish to be alone!"

Her voice was unrecognisable from emotion. Orme bowed his head in assent.

"As you will; perhaps it is best. Will you forgive me, and may I come to you tomorrow?"

She nodded dully. Orme spoke through the tube to the chauffeur, the car slid to a standstill half a dozen doors short of the Garths' house. He stepped from the car. The girl took the hand he held out to help her down; she pressed it slightly, and with a muttered "Good-night!" walked on quickly to the house alone.

Orme stood by the car and watched her, as, holding the cloak about her, she disappeared into the Garths' deep entrance-porch. For a minute he waited in silence; then, with a sigh, he got into the car, bidding the man take him to his rooms in Little College Street. He threw himself back against the cushions wearily.

"I would give something to undo this night's work!" he said to himself.

Little though he knew of women, there were few shrewder men in London than Orme; few that it would be harder to impose upon. Yet, not for one moment had he dreamed that he was the dupe of one of the cleverest kidnapping schemes in the history of crime. Natalie Ducros' impersonation was a masterpiece — a

stroke of genius. The one flaw in it was the pearl ring.

That alone, however, was without power really to arouse suspicion. He had been separated from Margaret in the passage scarcely for a matter of a minute. The girl who accompanied him back to Mayfair, veiled and cloaked, seen only in the gloom of the streets and the car, had hardly opened her lips. When she did, her voice was obscured by a natural emotion.

Not without cause did the employers of Natalie trust in her skill and resource. Had they been present in Berkeley Terrace, they would have observed that, after Orme's car left, the veiled figure had slipped quietly out again from the Garth's porch and departed.

Needless to say that no suspicion of it as much as entered Orme's head. Had it done so, he would have been superhuman.

The car dropped him at his rooms, he dismissed it, and went upstairs with a heavy heart. He turned on the light, and stood a moment thinking.

"I might have considered," he said to himself bitterly, "that Margaret has had pain enough from that villain Craven, without my adding to it by this folly. I, who would give my life to serve her!

"I could do nothing but respect her wishes and leave her at the house. But I wish I could have gone in. I owe an explanation to Mrs. Garth. She'll not spare me, and rightly, for what I have brought upon her daughter."

An impulse came upon him to return, to have the matter out. Would he be welcome? His eye fell on the telephone, and, snatching up the receiver, he gave the Garth's number.

It was late, and the call took some time to go through; but presently he heard a well-known voice over the wire.

"Is that Mrs. Garth? It is I—Orme. I cannot tell you how I blame myself for what has happened. I fear you will have found your daughter terribly upset."

Mrs. Garth's voice replied:

"I do not understand you. Margaret is not here! I have been waiting for you both. Where are you?"

"At my rooms! I left Miss Margaret at your door not twenty minutes ago," said Orme, with sudden anxiety. "She was very tired. Perhaps she went to her room without seeing you—would you find out please? For I do not understand this either."

There was a pause of some minutes, when Mrs. Garth's voice spoke sharply:

"She is not in the house! I find no one has been to the door these two hours, that is certain. Come to me at once! There is something wrong."

Orme hurried into the street. A deadly fear oppressed him, and lent wings to his feet. Strange thoughts, hardly yet taking shape, flitted through his mind. Where was Margaret? What did it all mean? That silent journey in the car—the ring—He ran the whole way to Berkeley Terrace.

The door was open; Mrs. Garth was in the hall, pale and anxious. She took Orme quickly into a side room, and in as few words as possible he told her what had happened. Her concern increased.

"The butler tells me," she said rapidly, "that no one whatever has been here. But he was in the hall about the time you mention, and thought he saw, through the side window, somebody standing in the porch. There was no ring. When he opened the door just afterwards, to make sure, there was no one there. Yet he is almost certain of what he had seen, and thinks now it was Margaret. What does this mean?"

Orme's fingers gripped the chair-back at his side.

"Mrs. Garth," he said quietly, "it seems a foolish question—you will think me mad. But

did your daughter tonight wear a small pearl ring on her right hand?"

"No. Margaret dislikes rings, and does not even own one. Why?"

Orme turned white as death. Swiftly the events of the evening ran through his brain, and took new shape. What had he done? Taken a daughter of the richest woman in London to London's lowest underworld. And what had he brought back?

"There is foul play here!" he said hoarsely. "Heaven forgive me for a fool! The woman who came here with me was not your daughter. But I will find her!"

He seized a sheet of paper on the table, and scrawled some words swiftly with a pencil.

"Ring up the police; give them this address and these instructions!" he said, choking back the lump in the throat. "I will not wait for that. I am going back to the place with all speed, and shall act for myself. There is no time for talk. I must have your car."

He sprang out of the room before she could answer, and, making for the hall-door, caught the butler by the arm.

"Mrs. Garth's car! Where is it to be had? Quick!"

The astonished man stammered an answer that did not help. Neither car was available—one, he knew, was stripped—the garage was at a distance—chauffeur did not live in the house. Orme abandoned the butler without wasting more time, and darted out into the street.

CHAPTER X

THE WATCHER

MARGARET GARTH, inert, collapsed, lay still on the grimy floor of the inner room. Ducros had left her where she lay. He was crouching behind the half-open door, watching through the wide chink of the hinge.

Cool and unflurried, there was yet a deadly suspense and purpose in his dark eyes. One hand clutched something under his jacket. He could see the woman who had left her pile of matchboxes, standing with her back against the farther wall as watchful as himself. Natalie, out in the passage, was invisible, but Ducros could hear her voice.

For some seconds the suspense lasted. Then the danger-light in the eyes of Ducros faded as he heard retreating footsteps; he gave a faint outbreath of relief.

"Bonne fille!" he muttered. "Name of a name! She is worth a dozen men!"

Swiftly he kicked aside a square of ragged matting on the floor, disclosing an ordinary loft trapdoor of wood with iron-battened edges. He raised this by its ring, and the match-box woman darted into the room.

"'S all right," she whispered. "Gone!"

The trap disclosed a short ladder. Ducros lifted Margaret, and with the woman's help he took her down the ladder. The descent, though short, was difficult in the circumstances, and occupied a couple of minutes. Ducros arrived below, and cast a word back to his accomplice.

"Get right away, you—quick as you like! Job was well done."

The woman closed the trap without answering. There was inky blackness below; but a dim pocket-torch in Ducros' hand flashed over a wide, low room, windowless, and littered with broken packing-cases, old rope, and rags. There was a door at one end.

Ducros lifted the girl again, and with the torch held deftly below her shoulders in his left hand, he bent low and passed at a run through the door and beyond it.

The distance he covered before stopping, and the number of turns he made in that foul human warren, were a tribute to Ducros' knowledge of

Ash Pit tenements. Once he paused, gasping for breath, set his burden down, and passed an arm across his wet forehead.

Ducros was slender and of poor physique, but indomitable will. In a few seconds he continued his journey and staggered into a brick-floored room at the head of a dark stairway. He laid Margaret down. A dim form, leaning against the wall, regarded them both impassively.

"Got the goods, then?" it said. "All well?"

"Is the van here?" panted Ducros.

"Ain't come yet."

Ducros turned on him with a fury that made the man shrink back.

"What's this? If there's any hitch, sure as I live you'll pay for it!"

"'Tain't within two minutes o' the time you said," was the answer; "better than havin' it waitin' about an' someone askin' fool questions. Ben's watchin'—he'll give us the office d'rectly it comes. What about the bloke that was with the girl—did they have to out him?"

"No—wasn't necessary."

"That's all to the good. A stiff always complicates things, don't it. Not that there'd be a dog's chance o' any one findin' their way right round here in time. Bear a hand, an' let's have it ready."

A dozen or more of tall, corrugated wood and cardboard cases stood in the room—the kind that are used for light portage of dresses and linen, and are better known on the Continent than in England. A colony of Belgian seamstresses inhabit that corner of the Ash Pit, and in these cases the fruits of their labour are periodically sent to Regent Street and the West. Three or four porter's racks, such as can be strapped to the back, and carried the cases easily, were also in the room.

The little torch's light fell on the face of Ducros' helper as he dragged one of the cases forward. He was a typical night-hawk of the slums, with blood-shot eyes, and thin, ape-like arms that reached nearly to his knees. He glanced at the unconscious girl and clicked his tongue faintly.

"What a price that'd fetch for the export trade!" he said, in the tones of a dog-stealer who comments upon a lucky capture. "Is it the game, Luke?"

"What is the game to you!" cut in Ducros venomously, bending beside Margaret. "Haven't you your orders from me?"

"Right! Don't get hot about it," said the man. He left the room, and in a few seconds returned.

"Van's here! Look sharp, guv'nor—the road's clear."

They lifted the girl's inert figure and placed it in the wood-framed case that had been singled out. This was fastened upright upon one of the carrying racks. Ducros knelt, and with the aid of his assistant, buckled the straps quickly across his chest.

He rose with an effort, his arms free, and the rack hanging to his shoulders. Down the evil-smelling stairway he crept, preceded by the other man, who flitted out across the open court at the bottom while Ducros halted in the shadow of the doorway.

In a few moments he saw the man beckon to him from a little distance. Ducros stepped out swiftly and silently with his freight, crossed the court that was surrounded by walls and dark windows, and so down a narrow alley to a road-way where a covered van waited.

He was scarcely halfway across, when the burden in the case shifted heavily by its own dead-weight. The strain was too great. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that a slender foot had burst through the mill-board that covered the wooden framework. A black shoe and a silk-clad ankle protruded stiffly. A curse broke from Ducros' lips. He quickened his pace and reached the van.

"Quick! Off with these straps!" gasped Ducros,

backing the porter's rack against the van's tail-board, his fingers tearing at the buckles.

With desperate speed the two men freed the case and thrust it into the van's interior; Ducros sprang after it, pulling the doors to. The hoofs of the horse rattled on the roadway, and the vehicle departed at a sullen trot.

The red-eyed man who had assisted shrank back into the alley's entrance and peered up and down the street with a pale, apprehensive face.

"More luck than good play!" he muttered, with a shiver. "Luke come near botchin' it for once. If anybody'd seen that ——"

He reassured himself with a last glance, and vanished softly into the night. The neighbourhood seemed a good one to get away from. The street. apparently, was deserted.

But not entirely.

Stealthily, a small figure stole from the shadow of a doorway a little farther down. It was a bare-footed, stunted lad, with a furtive face and cunning eyes. Keeping close against the wall, he watched the distant van, a curious grin upon his face, till it turned the corner.

He set off at a run, following it by the sound of the wheels, his naked feet padding softly upon the stones.

. . . . . .

Ducros, within the closed van, devoted himself with speed and energy to the better ordering of that extremely troublesome burden he had brought with him.

The porter's rack and case lay on the van's floor; the case was badly broken, and in no condition for any farther transit through London in its present state. But the captive was still in as heavy a stupor as Ducros could have wished.

He arranged the gag, and, opening the foot of the case, bound the girl's ankles lightly but firmly. He did the same with her wrists, caring no longer to trust to anything less scientific. It was all done in the callous, detached fashion in which a man handles merchandise. He then opened a small flap in the front of the van and, in a subdued tone addressed the back of the driver.

"Jem!"

"Ay?" growled the figure on the box.

"I've got to have an oilskin—a cloth. Anything that's large enough."

A tarpaulin driving-apron was passed through to him, and the flap closed. Ducros took the stiff black sheet with satisfaction, wrapped it round the case, and bound it neatly with cart-rope. There was no fear of any further outbreak. He sat beside the case on the van's floor, and lit a little,

bitter, black cigarette, inhaling it with deep thankfulness.

"If ever I deserved to go under in a job, it's now!" he said to himself grimly. "The rawest hand in the push wouldn't have made two such bungles! Can't take any credit that it's gone so well as it has, to date."

He glanced once or twice through the little shrouded window in the side of the van as it went on its way. They were in broader streets now. Twice a patrolling constable was passed, unconscious of what promotion lay within a few yards of him.

The journey was not a long one. Soon the wider thoroughfares were left behind; the dank smell of the river made itself felt, and the van drew up at last on a narrow track between two warehouses. The wide gleam of the tideway and its shipping showed beyond.

The driver descended. A shadowy form by the warehouses had signed to him that the way was clear. He opened the doors and helped Ducros to lift down the case quickly.

There was a wharf ten yards away where the tall mast and long sprit-yard of a Thames barge—one of the coasting type—cut sharp against the starry sky. It was high water, and the long black

vessel lay moored with ropes to the wharf itself. Two men, scarcely visible, were waiting on her decks.

The shrouded burden from the van was conveyed rapidly on board, the ropes were cast off, and one of the two men—a broad, heavy-faced ruffian in a blue jersey and long boots—poled the barge out from the wharf. The van-driver sprang ashore and took his vehicle away.

"Drop your hook a hundred yards out in the fairway, and keep watch," said Ducros briefly to the bargeman. "All's well, Vance! Bear a hand here—and look sharp!"

The case was passed down the hooded after-hatch into the stern-cabin by Ducros and the second member of the barge's crew. This latter, when the light from the dim cabin lamp fell upon his face, had in no way the appearance of a man of the rivers. He was thin and pale, with a high, bulging forehead, and looked like a derelict member of the professional classes.

"I've got the stuff wired up, Luke," he said, "and the whole gadget timed according to instructions; but the detonators have to be fixed yet. It's not a show that wants monkeying with until its needed."

"Show me what you've done, and quickly!"

said Ducros. "I've got to get out of this—time's short!"

The man lifted the floorboards and exposed an arrangement of galvanised tins and insulated wire with the pride of an artist.

"There's eighty pounds of T.N.T. and a dry gun-cotton primer," he said. "I've a two-way switch concealed handy by the hatchway. When I've fixed this it takes no more than a turn of the switch-handle and the clockwork starts the time-fuse. It will go for sixteen minutes to the tick."

"You're sure of your work?"

"I'm staking my life on it," said Vance quietly. "It's a big risk you're handing me, but I'm paid in proportion, and you know you can rely on me as on no one else. Sixteen minutes after the switch is thrown in, the barge'd go up in thin rain against the sky, with anything or any one that's left aboard her. There wouldn't be a square inch of anything to pick up afterwards."

"Show me the switch."

Vance took him to the hatch and laid bare an electric connector, hidden under a section of wood behind the companion-ladder. Ducros nodded.

"Now, listen!" he said, catching his companion by the arm. "This thing is no more than a precaution. It is fifty to one against it being

needed. But I take no chances. We're on a dangerous lay. If the game looks in the least like being blown upon, this gadget of yours wipes out the barge and all evidence that can speak or bear witness. Any one who meddles will go with it. Best for us all. I leave that in your charge until I return; then you may go and leave it to me. In the interval you must use your own judgment. The time-fuse gives you a certainty of getting away. See to it!"

"You can bank on me."

"Get the woman out, but leave her bound; there's too little air in that case. And one last thing"—his grip tightened on Vance's arm—"I may possibly not return if things go wrong, and shall send another in my place. You do not know him. He is taller than I, and he will give you my name—Luke Ducros. That will be enough for you. Show him the switch, leave him with the girl, and both you fellows clear out for good. Got that?"

"Every dot of it!"

"Then keep a good watch, as you value yourself. With care, you're as safe here as in the North Sea."

Ducros called the bargeman, said a few words to him, and was ferried quickly ashore in the boat,

which presently returned and was made fast astern. The bargeman spoke to Vance, and lay down by the windlass forward, watching the river silently.

Ducros, opening the door of the nearer warehouse, brought out a motor-cycle, which he wheeled through the byways into the main thoroughfare. He mounted, and the beat of the engine increased to a long, muffled stammer as he rode westwards upon his errand to Mayfair. Among the many curious qualities of Lucien Ducros, decision and courage had, at least, their place.

He dismounted at the portals of Mrs. Garth's house and quietly pressed the bell.

CHAPTER XI

THE ULTIMATUM

MRS. GARTH, when Orme left her, remained for some moments as though turned to stone. She scarcely noticed his exit.

In those few seconds the woman of influence and power that she normally was seemed to die out. There remained only the mother, agonised by the terror of losing all that she loved in the world. Tragedy had come into her life at one swift stride.

Mechanically her fingers closed on the scribbled paper Orme had left. Then her mind leaped into action. One thing, at least, must be done. She ran across the hall into the little writing-room, where the telephone stood, and seized the transmitter.

"Scotland Yard! Number——! Put me through instantly! Chief Superintendent's office!"

There seemed an age of waiting. The pulses were beating in her temples. She strove to collect her

thoughts and arrive at some clue to what had really happened. One thing stood out—there was foul play, beyond question!

She hardly heard the butler's entry into the room. He gave her a note, saying it had just been brought by a man, who would take no refusal, and was waiting.

On the envelope was written in a neat hand: "Concerning Margaret Garth."

She dropped the transmitter and tore the note open.

"See me at once, and alone. Your daughter is unhurt, and I can return her to you."

The note was unsigned, nor did she recognise the writing.

"Who sent this thing? Mr. Orme?" she said quickly.

"No, madam. I do not know the man. He insisted this should be brought to you."

Mrs. Garth crushed the note in her hand and turned back to the telephone. Then she checked herself; a thought shot through her mind. She smoothed out the note again. At first glance it seemed reassuring; but she had known instantly that it must be the work of an enemy. More, the writer was apparently unaware that she knew Margaret was missing. Her brain keen, alert

once more, Mrs. Garth decided on a plan of action.

"You say the man who brought this is here! Has he asked you any questions?"

"No, madam."

"If he attempts to, you will answer nothing. You understand? Bring him in here at once, and leave him with me."

As soon as the butler had left the room she returned the telephone transmitter to its hook, and with an effort of will forced herself to appear calm when the visitor was shown into the room.

Lucien Ducros looked perfectly cool and self-possessed. He closed the door himself, and bowed to Mrs. Garth.

"Be under no apprehension on your daughter's account, madam," he said gently. "There is no reason why she should not return to you within two hours."

Mrs. Garth scanned the man's olive, aquiline features keenly. He was unknown to her.

"What do you mean?" she said. "Explain yourself quickly! Where is my daughter?"

"She went to Woolwich, I believe, this evening. You are waiting for her? She has not returned?"

"No!"

"Have you taken any steps to discover why?"

"Not yet," replied Mrs. Garth quietly. "I have done nothing. It has only now been discovered that she is missing."

Ducros bent his gaze keenly on her for a few moments. A faint shade of relief seemed to pass in his eyes.

"It is just as well, perhaps. It simplifies things, Mrs. Garth. Do you recognise this?"

He laid a small gold brooch on the table. It was the one Margaret had worn. Mrs. Garth reached a trembling hand towards it.

"Madam," said Ducros softly, "you are the richest woman in London, and I am a professional rogue and thief. The opportunity of my life occurs tonight. Your daughter is not at Woolwich. She is in the hands of certain acquaintances of mine. It is absolutely certain that, except by my good will, neither you nor any living being will set eyes on her again. Time presses, and I will state my terms very briefly. £100,000 placed in my hands within the hour, and Margaret Garth will be returned to you unhurt."

Mrs. Garth was white as ashes. As her eyes rested on Ducros there was a look of loathing in them such as he had never seen on the face of any woman. Her hand reached for the bell.

"One moment!" said Ducros, more softly still.

"If you touch that bell, or make any movement hostile to me, you will condemn your daughter to death as surely as though you had slain her with your own hand!"

The two stood facing each other in silence. Mrs. Garth shivered.

"I come here," said Ducros, "with my life in my hands. That is obvious. I am playing for a great stake. It will be perfectly easy for you to deliver me to the police. I am alone with you in this house, I have no confederates within reach, and it is very unlikely that I could escape. Indeed, I shall not even attempt it—now, or at any other stage. I will have my terms, or accept the alternative—penal servitude. Which shall it be?

"Decide quickly, madam, for the issue is simple. After one o'clock tonight not even I can save your daughter. Will you pay the money, which is a trifle to you? Or do you prefer to revenge yourself on me, and know that she has met her death? To know that when the day dawns your daughter is a dishonoured corpse?"

The woman's hands fell slowly to her sides.

"I accept your terms," she said in a whisper, "so only that you restore her to me quickly. I thought I knew men, but I did not think that anything so vile as you existed!"

Ducros bowed courteously.

"Madam, I congratulate you. From this moment you need have no fear whatever. I merely require your word that when you have your daughter and I have the money you will take no further move against me until you return home. I shall accept your word. For the rest, I can look after myself. Let us be going."

"What must I do?" she asked dully.

"Call a car, and drive me to your bank on Cornhill. You alone have the entree to it at this time of night. You alone, among the affectionate mothers in this country, have at your command an almost unlimited sum, ready to your hand, in negotiable foreign bonds that cannot be traced. Gold in such amount is impossible; bank-notes are useless to me. I must have Argentine, Brazilian, or other bonds, of whose nature I will satisfy myself. See to it that you produce them, for on that depends everything. You need not even give them to me until your daughter is returned to you, which can be done at the bank itself. I will wait there with you. For the sake of all three of us, I beg you to make haste."

Mrs. Garth allowed herself but ten seconds of thought, and then again summoned her servant. The difficulty about the car was explained, but

she overcame it simply by sending her butler with an urgent verbal message to a friend who lived near by.

Ducros, meanwhile, sat quietly at the table, and appeared to take no interest, but he listened to the message. While they were waiting for the car Mrs. Garth went to another room—followed unbidden, by Ducros—and when she had taken from a heavy, locked safe a bunch of keys, he added a warning.

"I should tell you," he said, "that if by a word to any one, or the briefest signal, you attempt to betray me while we are together, I shall observe it. It is needless to say more. I think I hear the car."

It was drawn up at the door—a closed laudaulette. Mrs. Garth entered it without looking at the man who accompanied her. He paused a moment on the pavement, and looked inquiringly towards the railings of the house.

"Ah," he said quietly. "My motor-cycle! Removed? Stolen? Or——"

He hesitated, then gave the faintest shrug of his shoulders and got into the car, giving the bank's address to the driver.

"I hope," he remarked, as the car rolled away, "for the sake of all three people that are concerned in this affair, that no meddlers have forestalled me

here. Once again, my own failure will mean tragedy for your daughter. However, should anybody attempt to find her at the place where she was missed, they will be very wide of the track. We are really perfectly safe. Madam, I shall not trouble you henceforth with my conversation. You will wish to be silent."

Mrs. Garth had then neither the desire nor the power for speech. She did wonder dimly, more than once, what Orme was doing, and if he had been able to take any effective action. The thought only caused her to pray that he had not. She understood the threats of the suave demon who sat opposite to her in the car, and she felt that the issue lay solely between herself and him. He alone could restore Margaret to her. Nothing else under the stars mattered but that.

Only once was the silence broken before the journey's end, and it was Mrs. Garth who spoke.

"It is unnecessary, I suppose," she said, looking straight before her, "to ask for whom you have undertaken this villainy?"

"I do not understand you," said Ducros simply. "I am not the sort of fool to risk my neck for the enriching of anybody but myself. I have subordinates who require their share; that is all. And I am not here to answer questions, madam."

She said no more. The car stopped at Garth s Bank, and Ducros bade it wait. Mrs. Garth rang the night-porter's bell. The man came to the iron-grated door, received orders, and, with much grating of keys in locks, admitted the mistress of the bank and her companion. The porter showed no notable surprise at receiving a visit from the autocrat of Garth's at so late an hour. There were precedents enough for any such action on her part.

Mrs. Garth, using her own keys, made her way up to the panelled door on the first floor. She switched on the lights, unlocked the door in the back wall that led to the strong-room corridors, and signed to Ducros to remain where he was.

Ducros did so. This time he made no attempt to follow her. He was quite sure of Mrs. Garth.

And he was right. Even though, when she passed through the door, all the resources both of Garth and of the dark house of Gordon's lay to her hand, for once they were no more than a broken reed. Ducros held the winning hand, while Margaret was in his power. One false move from the woman, and he could turn her world into dust and ashes.

In a short time Mrs. Garth relocked the door, and, moving to the far side of the long table so that it lay between her and Ducros, she placed

upon it a sheaf of papers and scrip. By the side of the papers, ready to her hand, she laid a small, pearl-handled revolver, loaded in every chamber. Her face was calm and set, her voice perfectly steady.

"I have lived in other countries than this," she said, "and I am going to ensure that you keep your side of this bargain. The scrip will remain with me, in the meantime. And if you fail tonight to restore my daughter to me I shall kill both you and myself."

Ducros glanced from the pistol to the woman's face.

"I hope," he said, "that you do not intend to do anything so melodramatic with that absurd thing. This is cold business. It is true I am armed myself, but to kill you would merely be to place my head in the hangman's noose without profit, so that can be set aside. For you to kill me would ensure your daughter's death. Count in front of me the scrip that you have there, and keep it by all means."

Mrs. Garth rapidly separated the heap of green and blue engraved scrip into six little piles, tossed the top one of each to Ducros to examine, and counted over the rest before him with extreme swiftness. He followed every movement. The papers were

foreign bonds, which, though not currency, are, of course, negotiable anywhere. They require no transfer, and are not traceable. The amount was correct.

"Quite in order," said Ducros. "These will very shortly be mine." He took from his breast-pocket a small, brown waterproof cover and self-locking strap. "Be good enough to fasten up the stuff securely in this, and keep it for the moment. I could insist on its delivery at once, but you see that I do not. And now I will use your telephone and fulfil my side of the contract."

He moved towards the instrument.

"Stop!" said Mrs. Garth commandingly. "What are you going to do?"

"I shall telephone a message to a certain quarter, and the result in due course will be your daughter's release."

"I should be mad to trust you," replied Mrs. Garth, in final tones, and her hand closed on the pistol. "I refuse! How can I tell what message you will send, or what treachery is in your mind? Stand back from that telephone!"

Ducros paused.

"I am settling this matter, and not you," he answered. "Still, there are two ways, and I shall give you your choice. One is for me to

send this message over the wire. It has objections, even for me, and it may cause some trouble and delay. The other—is for you to accompany me yourself to the place where your daughter is. And there I will deliver her to you."

"I choose that way!" said Mrs. Garth. "Take me to my daughter. No matter where she is—it is enough for me if I find her. Take me to her."

Ducros glanced at the woman curiously.

"You are not afraid?" he said.

The silent scorn in Mrs. Garth's eyes answered him.

"Madam," he said, "I begin to entertain a respect for you. It seemed to me useless to suggest this, but it is the shortest method, and I prefer it. Though I don't expect you to believe me, I shall deal quite squarely by you if you do the same by me." He made for the door.

Mrs. Garth slipped the revolver and the package containing the scrip into the inner pocket of the light dust-cloak she was wearing. Ducros observed it, and smiled very slightly. He led the way downstairs; they were let out by the silent night-porter, and Ducros gave a brief order to the driver of the car, which bore them at a rapid rate through the City and eastwards.

Ducros, paying no attention to the woman who

sat silently opposite him, kept a careful eye on the streets after they had passed through Greenwich, and it was he who gave the signal to stop, in a by-road at a short distance from the river.

"We must walk the rest of the way," he said briefly, and as soon as they alighted he went to the driver's side.

"You may return where you came from," said Ducros, handing over a solatium in money that made even the bored chauffeur stare and salute respectfully. "It is Mrs. Garth's wish that you should not talk about your journey this evening. Say merely, if you are asked, that you drove her to the bank and eventually left her there."

He led the way at a quick walk through the sleeping riverside streets, and they eventually arrived at the lonely wharf which Ducros had quitted an hour and a half before. It was nearly thirty minutes after midnight. The barge still lay at anchor two hundred yards out in the tideway.

There were other barges anchored a little farther down the river. One of them could be dimly seen under weigh, her tanned sails shaken out; she was about to drop down on the ebb-tide. Ducros spared her no more than a glance, for she was receding farther every moment, and bargemen are incurious folk.

"You must wait for me while I get a boat, for there is no other way," he said to Mrs. Garth. "I have one close by, and——"

A footfall, not far away, was heard by both of them. Ducros grasped his companion suddenly by the arm and drew her back into a dark angle of the warehouse fence.

"Keep very quiet," he breathed, "or we may be seen!"

The loathed touch of the man nearly drove Mrs. Garth to sudden madness; she was instantly on the defensive. Ducros seemed to recognise his mistake and released her arm, but in a swift whisper he warned her that discovery now would be as fatal to herself and her object as to him. He did not know who the intruder might be, and would run no risks till he was sure. He crouched by her for some moments, listening and peering through the gloom.

"All well," he said quietly; "it is a friend of mine. You will see now that you have done well to obey me. Wait here."

He darted down the causeway to a little inlet by the warehouse, where a skiff lay moored, and as he cast her loose with nimble fingers he gave a soft whistle. A dim figure came down from the warehouse and quickly joined him.

"It was you, then?" said Ducros. "All clear?"

"Don't know," muttered the man uneasily. "Nobody's left the shore here. But I thought I heard a row on the barge."

Ducros' face changed.

"Take this, then. Get it to Number 9, and hand over. You understand? Clear right out!" he said.

The man vanished into the night, and Ducros hesitated.

"Must be all right!" he muttered. Poling the boat across to the wharf, he called softly to Mrs. Garth. She came at once, for indeed she had followed him, and was at no time more than a few yards away.

He signed to her to get into the boat.

"Our journey is ended," he said. "Your daughter is on the barge at anchor yonder. I shall place you at her side, leave you alone with her, and both of you, I give my word, will be quite safe. It may be morning before you can get ashore with your daughter, and that you must endure. By then the united police forces of both hemispheres would not find me. But if you are afraid, there is still time to draw back."

"I do not fear you in the least," said Mrs. Garth quietly, and she took her seat in the boat. Ducros

pulled swiftly out from the shore, bending to the oars. Mrs. Garth's heart beat painfully as they neared the vessel, but she remained outwardly calm. One of her hands crept inside her cloak.

A little gasp escaped her. The revolver was there, and her fingers clutched it. But the flat package that held the papers was gone.

"So," she said swiftly, leaning forward, "you have robbed me!"

"I have taken my fee, it is true," he replied coolly; "and should any accident befall me, it is already in a safe place. For an hour, madam, you have been in the company of one of the cleverest thieves in Europe, and I should have been a fool not to make my fee safe, for I trust you no more than you trust me. But I deliver the goods, and from this hour you and your daughter are free!"

"You will pay the price, else. For your life is in my hands," she said unsteadily.

"I consider my life has been in more danger than yours any time this last hour," he answered. "You are not a woman to handle with gloves. But I have never valued my life, for until now it has never been valuable. You will reflect on that, however, after I have left you."

Ducros ceased pulling, and turned his head to glance at the barge, now hardly sixty yards dis-

tant. He gave a gentle, quavering whistle. There was no answer. Something that lay on the barge's dark deck caught his eye. He stared more intently, drawing in his oars.

And then the end came.

There was a roar like a clap of thunder. The barge, riven into a thousand fragments, disappeared in a column of yellow flame that tore the night.

CHAPTER XII

THE GUTTERSNIPE

WHEN John Orme left the Garth's house, sick with fear at the thought that Margaret was in danger and maddened by the delay, he knew that only one hope remained. He must return himself, without waiting for aid. Swift transit to Woolwich he must have, at any cost.

The muffled chug-chug of a motor-cycle was audible down the street. Orme would have given his right hand to be the man that owned it. But that was hopeless. He caught sight of a laden taxi-cab rounding the next corner—it seemed to be slowing up. Orme dashed in pursuit. He would have that taxi, even if he had to throw the driver into the roadway to get it.

Doubling the corner he sighted the cab; it had pulled up at a house some four hundred yards ahead; somebody got out, but the cab still had passengers and started again at once. Orme ran, and shouted at the pitch of his lungs. Useless. The taxi drew rapidly out of range.

He turned back, almost beside himself, to the Garths' house. Minutes had already been wasted. Then he saw, leaning against the railings, a motor-cycle. Hardly able to believe in his luck, he ran towards it.

The motor-cycle had certainly not been there when he left the house. Where it came from, or whose it was, Orme cared not a straw. It was a pattern he knew and had ridden, the engine was hot—he flung his leg over the saddle and kicked the clutch in. Five seconds later the machine was roaring through the streets, bound for Woolwich, at a pace that made the houses echo as it passed.

Had that twin-cylinder kept up for the whole distance the speed at which Orme was willing to drive it, a record would have been broken in London motor speeds. It is difficult at night for the police to check a reckless man on a powerful machine. But before he reached Blackfriars the engine was running red-hot and missing badly, for it was in indifferent order. On the far side of the bridge it gave out altogether, and Orme, in a fever of impatience, had to dismount and spend ten furious minutes in attending to it. He induced it to spark again, but could get no more out of the machine than about nine miles an hour.

Lame though it was, there was nothing to be

gained by abandoning it and seeking other transport so late at night, and the thought of risking delay by trying to obtain a police car hardly entered his head. Orme's instinct in emergencies was to depend on himself, and he had at once decided on the only plan that was left him. If he could not trace Margaret in the Ash Pit, there was little hope that the police could do it after the alarm. That she had been kidnapped, he no longer dared to doubt, and the possibilities shot through his brain like white-hot stabs.

He arrived at the spot where his car had waited, and driving through the alleys, shut off the engine and glided into the long lane bordered by the high wall. His breath came quick and short as he leaped from the machine and ran to the door of the house he had left more than an hour and a half before.

The door was bolted. As he put his shoulder to it, a stunted, furtive-eyed lad, with ragged clothes and bare feet, slid out from the gloom of the alley.

"Lookin' for the gal?" the lad said quietly.

Orme gave a gasp, and turned upon the speaker. He knew the lad well—too well indeed—as one of the children of perdition that the Ash Pit bred in such numbers; he had had dealings with the boy's family.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed, gripping the guttersnipe by the arm.

"I knows wot's come to 'er—that's all," said the boy, his uncanny, intelligent eyes fixed with watchful inquiry on Orme's face.

"Tell me quickly!" said Orme, with a prayer that one of the arrows from Luck's quiver was going to help him in a situation that had looked hopeless. "If you are fooling with me, heaven help you!"

"Not me. I see you come 'ere with a gal in a veil, an' go up to Mother McGee's. Arterwards I went round to Gunner's Row, w'ere I lives. I was lookin' through the broken winder there, an' I see a van drawn up. I see'd two blokes shove a dress-case into it. An' I see the dress-case break, an' a gal's foot come through. I reckon I see a bit more'n I was meant to. 'Course, it mightn't ha' bin the same gal. But I'll lay it was."

He felt Orme trembling violently; the hand that held him shook.

"What have you done?" said Orme thickly, "have you put the police on to them?"

"Perlice!" said the boy contemptuously, and spat. "I'm the sort that fancies the perlice, ain't I? Why, for all I knowed, you was in the plant. It looked like it. But," he added quickly,

"thinkin' it over I reckoned not. I finished by slidin' out 'ere agen, in case you missed somethin' an' come back. See? You've done me well afore this, mister."

"Do you mean that you have done nothing!" cried Orme.

"Done wot? I knows w'ere the gal is—that's somethin', ain't it? She was shoved on to a ship on the river, not a mile from 'ere. D'ye want to be put wise? Don't I stan' to make a bit 'ere?"

"If this is true, you shall never want again as long as you live!" said Orme swiftly. "You are coming with me." He swung the motor-cycle round. "Get on the carrier and hold tight to me —can you do that?"

"I don't fink," said the boy, perching himself deftly behind as Orme started. "Why," he added with surprise, "you've got the bloke's bike. Unless there's two out tonight wiv a mud-guard twisted that way."

"What! Whose bike?"

"The chap wot done the job—I see 'im come ashore an' go off on a bike just like this, that 'e took from a shed."

This news, which the boy delivered so confidently, started a train of thought in Orme's mind, which there was no time to follow up, and he put

it aside. Every second was of value. The cycle stammered out into the main streets, turning to the right at the boy's direction.

"Know Bleak's Wharf?" he said, clinging on as the machine swept round a corner. "No? The Three Schooners pub in the Erith Road, then? Make that, an' I'll tell yer 'ow to go."

The journey did not take eight minutes under the boy's capable directions, for he knew every purlieu of the riverside. The light in the cycle-lamp was dying out, as they turned through the narrow ways by the water-front, and Orme opened the glass and let it blow out.

"I'd shut down that there barkin' engine, too, if I was you," said the lad, "we're gettin' close up now, an' I reckon the quieter we goes the better. Unless," he added, with a grin, "they take us for the owner o' the bike comin' back."

Orme scarcely heard him. His throat was dry, and his pulses beating fast. But he cut out the engine, threw the clutch out, and dismounting, wheeled the machine along at a run, guided by the lad, who begged for silence, and ran at his side stealthily. They came out upon a deserted quay, littered with empty barrels.

"Is this the place?" said Orme.

"No," the boy answered, "we're two wharves

'igher up than w'ere they came to. I reckoned it'd be safer. You can see the ship from 'ere, though. That's 'er."

He pointed to the dim shape of the barge at anchor. They stood some three hundred yards farther upstream than the wharf to which Ducros had brought the van. The vessel lay well out from the shore, her hull no more than a dark blur on the water, but her mast showed plainly against the stars. In answer to Orme's question, the lad was emphatic that the barge, and no other, was the one to which the girl had been taken. More than that he could not tell, but the craft had certainly not moved since.

Orme looked swiftly round for a boat. There was none at hand, and on second thoughts he discarded the idea. A boat was too conspicuous—there would surely be a watch kept on the barge. He stripped off his coat.

"Listen!" he said. "I am going to get aboard that barge, but you will not wait for me. There should be a River Police launch at the Rafts, higher up—if she is not there, find her as quickly as you can. Tell the men in charge what has happened and bring them down at once. Understand?"

"Those blokes'll do you in," said the boy sullenly, "an' I shall get——"

"Go!" said Orme fiercely, "do as I bid you!"

The boy slipped away without another word. Orme ripped the laces of his boots, kicked them off, waded quietly into the river at the upper side of the wharf, and struck out from the shore.

The water was icy, and the ebb-tide ran fast. With a judging eye upon the distant barge, he headed straight across stream with quiet, powerful strokes, nor did he turn down river until he was well outside a line from the barge to the shore.

There was little fear of his being seen from the banks, for there was no phosphorescence in the water, and the shadows lay ink-black upon the swirling river. He ceased swimming, and merely paddled gently to keep his position, letting the current sweep him down towards the barge.

As he neared her, he thought he could see the faint outline of a man lying in the bows. A few minutes later he was sure of it. The man was keeping a silent look-out towards the shore and the wharf opposite him, and Orme had chosen his tactics well, for he was approaching the barge on the riverward side of her. He held his breath as he drifted down under the shadow of the low black bows.

The barge lay with a hard sheer inshore, her anchor-chain stretching at an angle from her, taut as

a bar of iron, with the tide gurgling across it. Orme reached up for the bulwark, got his foot on the chain, and with a mighty effort heaved himself on deck.

The bargeman sprang up with a stifled cry, that was choked back as Orme leaped on him and took the man's throat in a grip of iron. They swayed together in a blind struggle.

A head was thrust out of the after hatch, and its owner, with an oath of surprise and panic, ducked below again before he made any attempt to help his companion forward. The bargeman tore one hand free and whipped it swiftly to the case-knife at the back of his belt; at the same moment Orme threw his weight forward and struck one heel sharply behind his opponent's ankle. They fell heavily, the bargeman beneath; his head struck the pawl of the windlass, the stiffening went out of his muscles, and he lay limp and still.

Orme struggled to his feet. There were two iron handspikes stuck in the windlass. Swiftly he snatched one of them from its socket and dashed aft. The man from the cabin hatch was on deck, and running to meet him.

Orme could see little of him save a rushing figure, a pair of white eye-balls, and a steel-blue gleam, but he whirled the handspike downwards

with a crashing blow, and the man dropped like a log.

A red mist swam before Orme's eyes, the fighting madness had risen in him, he ran aft still gripping the iron bar. But there was now no one to stop him—the cabin hatch stood open, he swung himself down the ladder and checked for a moment at the bottom, expecting a further attack.

There was dead silence, except for a sound like the muffled ticking of a clock. He paused only for a moment; there was a narrow door before him, and a light. He darted through into the cabin.

In the starboard berth lay Margaret, bound and gagged, her face deadly white, and in her eyes a horror beyond speech. It changed to amazement and joy when she saw Orme, though she could scarcely turn her head.

"Thank God!" he said, with a broken sob, and throwing himself on his knees beside her, he freed her from the bonds and the gag; his hands, trembling, sought hers. "You are not hurt?" was all he could stammer out.

"No," she gasped, trying to rise, "but get me away quickly. You—we are in fearful danger."

"What! Are there more of those blackguards here?" said Orme grimly, reaching for the iron bar. "I found two who will give us no more trouble."

"There is worse!" panted Margaret; "the men who brought me here—I heard them talking—I saw what one of them did. They have planned to destroy the barge if there was danger of capture—there are explosives on board—under the floor, I think!"

Orme stared, for a moment scarcely comprehending. The steady, muffled clicking that he had heard when descending the hatch again smote on his ear; the girl's hurried words gave that sound a new and deadly meaning.

To wait or search, with Margaret at hand, would have been madness. He caught her up in his arms, and in a few moments was through the hatchway and on deck.

A dreadful fear seized him that even now he might be too late. Carrying the girl with him, he ran aft and caught at the painter-rope by which the barge's boat was made fast. The sheet-block had jammed over it and made the knot like a lump of iron. He hacked at it, but the stiff, tarred rope turned the edge of his knife.

A few more seconds delay might well mean destruction. Orme flung down the knife and caught up the life-buoy that hung aft near the helm. Without hesitation he caught Margaret round the shoulders and drew her with him over the side.

"Trust to me!" he said; "I will see you safe. Quickest way—surest!"

She was too weak to resist, even had she wished to. They sank with scarcely a splash into the oily tideway, coming to the surface instantly. Orme, holding up Margaret with his left arm, struck out strongly with the other, the tide bearing them down-stream at a rapid pace. His teeth were set and his shoulders seemed to hunch involuntarily as if in expectation of the crash of an explosion behind him. But the barge, now left well above them, still rode quietly at anchor. He heard Margaret gasp faintly at his side.

"Don't clutch me!" he said quickly, "you are safe if you keep quiet. I dared not wait!"

"I am not afraid now," she said feebly.

Thanking heaven for the courage that he saw was in her, Orme drew her arms across the life-buoy.

"Keep like that. You could not sink if you tried. In a minute we shall be ashore."

He guided the buoy, swimming less strongly now, for the danger was past and the night's long strain began to tell. Even Orme's iron strength was failing. He glanced towards the dark shore. Had any one there seen him—if so, would they be friend or foe? He saw the riding-light of another

barge no great distance below, right in the line with him. There, at least, would be safety and shelter. The tide was fast driving him down to it. He called out hoarsely.

"Barge! Barge, ahoy!"

"'Ullo!" said a sleepy voice. Then heavy feet moved quickly on the decks, a long boat-hook was thrust out as Orme came within reach, and he clutched it. It was drawn in so violently that his head struck against the iron batten on the barge's lee-board as he came alongside, and an astounded man in a pea-jacket stared down at the strange flotsam that he had plucked from the river.

"Get her on deck!" gasped Orme feebly.

The skipper bent down, and hoisted Margaret bodily out of the water. He laid her down, seeing that she was in a state of collapse, and ran to his cabin hatch.

"Mary!" he called, "bear a hand! Gal here, 'alf drowned!"

He came back to help Orme on board; by the time it was done a stout, broad-faced woman in sea-boots had heaved herself up through the hatch, and, seeing the dripping form of Margaret, half-lying on the deck, ran to her side with a cry of pity.

"Poor lamb!" she exclaimed, "how came she in the water? An' you!" she added, looking up

at Orme. "Why, you're bleeding! What sort o' work's this?"

Orme, very white, was swaying slightly, a thin stream of blood ran from a cut over his forehead.

"Please do what you can for her," he said weakly; "thank heaven there is a woman here. Never mind me, I'm all right."

"You don't look it," said the skipper, as his wife lifted Margaret as though she were a baby, and carried her below. "Lucky we was here. What craft is you off, sir? Been run down?"

Orme pointed to the vessel he had left, still faintly visible upstream. He was feeling dazed.

"Do you know that barge?" he said. "What is her name?"

"Can't say," replied the skipper, following Orme's eyes. "It was dark when I brought up here. Looks like a Medway barge. Were you on her?"

"I was on her," said Orme unsteadily, for he felt dazed. "There is a load of explosives on board her which are likely to go up at any moment. I——"

He caught hold of a back-stay and sat down suddenly on a coil of rope at his feet, for the river seemed to swim before his eyes.

The skipper gaped at him open-mouthed. It

was some time before Orme's words conveyed any connected idea to his brain. But, when they did, he acted with remarkable promptitude.

The skipper ran forward, hurled overboard the buoy-rope and moorings to which the vessel rode, slipped the chain, and violently hauled up the big red foresail. Hurrying aft he cast off the brail, forced his tiller hard over, and the barge began to move across the river as the sails bellied to the faint night breeze.

Orme watched the man like one in a dream, hardly grasping what the bargeman was doing. The long nightmare that had passed, and the shadow of deadly peril so suddenly lifted from the woman he loved, were all wiped out by the mist before his eyes. His head drooped on his breast, and he knew nothing.

How long he remained so, Orme had no idea afterwards. But it could not have been long, for when he felt a trickle of rasping spirit in his throat and saw the skipper standing over him with a flask, it seemed to him the fateful barge was still visible up the river.

"Can't you get abreast of her?" he said, struggling painfully to his feet.

"I ain't the faintest notion of tryin'," said the skipper bluntly; "I saw an ammunition-barge go

up once at Sheerness, an' the farther I can get from a craft like that the better for me. But is it a fairy-tale you've been givin' me, mister?" he added, looking at Orme keenly, "or is the sense driven out o' you? For nothin's happened to that barge yet, an' it seems to me I saw a boat movin' off to her from the shore just now."

Orme peered dizzily up the river in silence. He, too, was beginning to wonder if Margaret had not deceived herself. It might have been a clock that he heard ticking in the cabin.

At that moment he, the barge, and the skipper, were illumined by a flash brighter than noonday. For the fraction of a second the river and shores were lit vividly. Then followed a dull crash that shook the decks under their feet, and a slow descent of fiery fragments up by the wharf.

The skipper swore softly, in amazement. Orme stood silent.

"There were two men on that barge," he said, almost under his breath, "and whether they died by my hand or their own, I am still ignorant. Nor do I much care. There is only one thing on earth that matters. Find out for me how the lady is that I brought on board."

"She'll do yet," said a voice. The skipper's wife, brought on deck by the sound of the explo-

sion, stood at Orme's side, a satisfied look on her placid face. "I s'pose, mister, you were gettin' away from that firework-boat. Nasty stuff, powder. Yes, the lady's doin' fine—she's sleepin' like the dead, an' even that row didn't wake her. I've got her in warm blankets, an' there's a rig of dry clothes for her when she's fit to move."

"See here, sir!" exclaimed the skipper excitedly, "let's hear what devil's game this is, that's been played! It seems to me——"

"I am a little tired for explanations now," said Orme. "It is a long story, you will learn it soon enough, and be very sure you shall not be losers, for we owe you much. But what I need now is to be landed with that lady, as soon as she can travel, and get her to her home."

"That's sense," said the woman; "my old man'll get busy and do that for you, sir, instead of askin' questions that look like keepin' us here all night."

"Missus is right, as usual," said the skipper; "I'll get the barge down to Coldharbour as fast as this breeze'll let me, an' I'll find land transport for you an' the lady to the place where you belongs. Let me give you a hand below, sir, while the old woman steers. For you look more done than ever I saw a man in my life."

. . . . . .

At nine in the morning a shabby, closed-in motor stopped at the Garths' house. The footman, opening the door, lost his professional calm and uttered a gasp of amazement. For his eyes rested on Margaret Garth, white and worn, clad in a wide dress of home-spun serge stained with mud and salt. Beside her was John Orme, haggard, and looking like a ghost.

"Is my mother here?" said Margaret anxiously.

"She came back two minutes ago, Miss Margaret," stammered the man, "in the morning-room."

Margaret, who walked with difficulty, went as quickly as possible into the room. Mrs. Garth was there, her arms stretched across the table, her head resting on them.

She looked up slowly, her face drawn and ghastly, her eyes black-ringed. There was a moment of stupefied silence. Then, with a wild cry of joy she clasped Margaret in her arms.

"My darling!" she said trembling. "Thank heaven! It is you—it is my little Meg! And I thought the world was ended for me!"

"I am safe, dear, unharmed," said Margaret weakly; "forgive me that I have brought this upon you."

Mrs. Garth looked at the girl's white face swiftly.

"Don't talk of it. Don't speak or think at all, dear," she said tenderly, "come with me."

As quickly as might be, she took Margaret to her own room, summoned the maid, and gave her orders. Margaret protested faintly that her mother was in more need of care than herself.

"Mother," she whispered, "that I am alive I owe to the bravest man living. It was my own folly that led to this. You will not blame Mr. Orme? He saved me. He was fearless—splendid! And I—useless—a little fool!"

"I know. Forget it all, dear, for the present. I will not let you talk. Rest—sleep."

With her own hands she laid her daughter to rest—the girl was too worn out to resist. A doctor had already been telephoned for; Mrs. Garth did not leave the room till he had arrived, and pronounced that beyond shock and exhaustion there was no harm to be feared. Rest alone was needed. When the physician was gone, Mrs. Garth sank upon her knees, and prayed.

She rose presently, and hurried downstairs. Worn though she was, the blood coursed quicker in her veins, and there was a new light in her tired eyes.

Orme had withdrawn and kept out of the way, when mother and daughter met. She found him

now, waiting in the morning-room alone. He hung his head as she entered.

"I have brought grief enough on you, and danger," he said in a low voice. "I do not know what you will say to me!"

"I think I know what I shall say to you," she replied quietly, "for you have raised me from the dead, and not my daughter only. But there are things to be done. Tell me all that happened."

Orme thought she was scarcely fit to hear it. But he related briefly and grimly his story. Of his own part in it he said as little as possible. When he had done, Mrs. Garth rose, and took his hand in hers.

"Words are useless at times like these," she said in a shaken voice. "That my daughter and I are living at this moment is due to you. You are such a man as women sometimes dream of. And," she added softly, in a lower voice, "may heaven send you your reward."

Their eyes met; into those of Orme flashed suddenly a wonderful light—a hope that he dared not put into words. Then it died out, and he shook his head. He felt that he was farther from his goal than ever.

"I will tell you something," said Mrs. Garth, "that seems hidden from you." She shivered

slightly. "When that explosion happened, I was close by."

"You!" exclaimed Orme. He thought her senses were wandering.

"A man came here," she said, averting her eyes, "after you had gone. He asked money from me —for Margaret's safety. I dared not refuse; I got him the money and went with him. He took me to that vessel on the river. We were in a boat, quite near, when—the thing happened."

"Great heavens!" said Orme, aghast; "you went through that? And then——?"

"I can scarcely tell, even now, what happened after that," she said dizzily, passing a shaking hand across her eyes. "I thought Margaret was on the barge. I believe I went mad for a time. Some burning wreckage fell in the boat; I think the man with me was hurt. The boat drifted with us—whether for minutes or hours I don't know—till a launch full of police came. They took me away, to a station. When I was able, I told them what I knew. Then one of them brought me back here."

Orme leaned forward.

"I think," he said slowly, "that no more subtle piece of villainy was ever planned. The thing becomes very clear to me. That scoundrel, if he

could have got you to the barge, would have destroyed both you and Margaret—making himself safe, and leaving no trace behind him."

"It is possible. But I was prepared for anything, and I did not fear him," said Mrs. Garth quietly. "I cared only to reach Margaret, and believed that I would save her. The thing that occurred is still a mystery to me."

"The men on the barge had prepared a means of destroying her and getting away, in case of need—by explosives and some sort of time fuse," said Orme; "there isn't much doubt they started the thing off when I arrived—perhaps in a panic, not knowing I was alone. All this matters little now. Those two have paid the price, but we want the principals. Where is the man who came to you?"

"In custody. The River Police took him."

"Ah!" said Orme grimly, "this is good! The law will deal him his reward. I have not even seen the police yet—we were landed, far down the river, by a barge that rescued us, and my first care was to get your daughter home to you. Now I shall go to Scotland Yard."

He rose, and looked at her keenly.

"Mrs. Garth," he said, "do you believe that this outrage was nothing but the plot of a gang of

criminals to rob you? Do you not see another hand behind it? The hand of Craven!"

"I have thought so," she replied quietly.

"I feel certain of it! It is the work of a master scoundrel. You and I know only too well what we have to expect from him, and the motive. Now he shall pay the price!" said Orme fiercely. "I will bring this charge to his face!"

Mrs. Garth held up a warning hand.

"Stop!" she said, "remember that unless you have the link that binds him to this affair, that charge would be your ruin! Doubtless he is waiting for some such false move as that. You are enemies, as the world knows. Craven is a fighter, and his reply would be a prosecution for criminal libel. The police would not touch him without sure proofs, and, if you have none, you will lose your liberty and your career. For you may be wrong.

"Now," she said, rising, "I must have rest, but not for long. There is much that I have to do. Never fear for me—the strain has been great, but I am very strong, and there is a hatred burning in me that will not be easily quenched.

"Go now," she added, "to the police. Tell them everything you know of last night's work—give them the facts, to the last iota. But leave Melmoth Craven to me!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE CHALLENGE

SIR MELMOTH CRAVEN lit the cigar that was clenched between his strong, white teeth, watched the smoke-wreaths with cool satisfaction, and jerked away the match.

"Success!" he said. "Success, after the overcoming of obstacles, is a thing that tastes well in the mouth. My doubting and somewhat weak-kneed friends, do you not agree with me? Bold measures have paid us best, and the Steinberg Syndicate comes out on top."

Mr. Steinberg and Senor Culebra did not at once reply. They were sitting in Sir Melmoth's rooms on the afternoon following the day of Margaret Garth's rescue. Culebra glanced at Craven and nodded slightly, but Steinberg's forehead was damp, and his manner nervous.

"You call it success, Craven," he said, "and so, in a measure, it is. But it seems to me we are sitting on the brink of a volcano."

"On the contrary," said Craven calmly, "we are as safe as we have ever been during our somewhat chequered existences. And we have the money that has rescued us all from tragedy."

"That is true," said Steinberg, brightening, and a dull gleam came into his eyes. "We have the money, it is a great achievement, and you've resources and courage, Craven, that are beyond me. But——"

"One hundred thousand pounds," interrupted Sir Melmoth, "is no small stake to play for. Within ten hours of its reaching me, the bonds were negotiated in the proper quarters; their source is absolutely untraceable. By their aid, we have today not only averted the threatened shipwreck —we come out of it with a healthy profit! Not the great coup we first hoped to make, it is true. But our financial lives are saved, and we are well to the good. We have, in fact, triumphed."

"With Ducros in custody!" said Steinberg tremulously, "and all three of us at the mercy of a word from him! His conviction is certain! You dare to say that he will not betray us!"

"I dare to stake my life on it—and yours," said Craven. "I know Ducros. What would he gain by betraying us? His freedom? No, for the crime was his. Perhaps a year's reduction of

sentence at the most. What would he lose? Twenty thousand pounds. For we must deal absolutely straight by Ducros. The money is even now in the hands of his sister, Natalie—the one living creature he trusts and can depend on. Ducros is safe as far as we're concerned. I always thought it possible he might be caught—so did he. The fact does not scare me."

"What will he get?" said Culebra thoughtfully. "I fear, Craven, that if it's a life sentence——"

"No!" replied Craven emphatically, "nothing like it. There are loopholes. I predict ten years. That means, in actual fact, about eight to serve. He bargained for the risk of it, and has got his price."

"You're right," nodded Culebra, "I stand on your judgment."

"What beats me," said Steinberg, "is that he should have passed the money on to you at all, Craven, instead of sticking to it all, when he had it in his hand."

"You judge him by yourself," said Craven with a dry smile. "Perhaps he had not the choice. Remember the risk he was running. I do not leave such vital things to chance. The money came direct to me, quite safely, as I had arranged it should. For I was right in the game, while you fellows stood outside it."

"And you do not fear," persisted Steinberg, "that someone may connect Ducros with us, and trace the thing indirectly to you?"

"I defy all Scotland Yard and Paris to do it!" returned Craven. "Well as I know Ducros, there are only three people living, outside this room, who are aware that he was ever in my company. One does not advertise these things. Those three are himself, Natalie, and my man, Sugden. All of them safe. And please don't take me for a fool. I have covered my tracks to the last inch! Natalie is already out of the country, and they know nothing about her.

"See how we stand!" he added, marking each point with a rap of his knuckles on the table; "we sweep the board, and hold a great sum in hand even after paying Gordons, Limited—that blood-sucking vampire that might have skinned us! We save on that bargain with her, for we're well within the time-limit and have got the cash to wipe the debt out. The game's ours."

"It does me good to hear you, Craven," said Steinberg, with a sigh of relief. "I confess I have been imagining hourly that I hear the step of a detective on the stair, and the clink of handcuffs. But you've an answer to everything—you put matters in a new light. You've

pulled us out of the mire, Craven. Let's be thankful. We must lie low now, of course."

"Lie low be hanged!" said Sir Melmoth, rising and facing them both, "that was never my policy! We stand on our feet at last. Whatever comes, I'm out for the big things! We've half-a-dozen strong schemes in hand—forward with them, I say! As for me, I'll be in the front or nowhere!

"See here!" he threw a newspaper across the table to them, "you've followed the news, I suppose—unless you were too busy shaking in your shoes? The Government has fallen. There is to be a General Election. And there's an opening for me. I am going to stand for Westington."

"What!" exclaimed Culebra.

"I am going to stand for Westington, against that young hound, John Orme!" said Sir Melmoth, striking the table, "and I will beat him! That should show you whether I've any fears or not. I've had it in my mind some time—my name was sent up today, and my nomination as candidate is certain. I've great interests down there, and my family seat is in the division. I am not boasting," he added more quietly. "I will take that cur's seat in Parliament from him, before I break him finally."

Culebra sprang up.

"Right again!" he said, "you're a man, Craven, and I back you all the way. The bold policy's the best."

. . . . . .

Twelve days later the Ducros trial opened at the New Bailey. In spite of Sir Melmoth's serene confidence, the other partners felt a decided nervousness. Craven did not attend the trial, contenting himself with sending the stronger-nerved of his two colleagues to watch the proceedings. The court-house was full to overflowing.

Ducros, cool and apparently unmoved, sat in the dock, his dark eyes perfectly expressionless staring straight before him. There was something almost Oriental in his quiet submission to fate.

"The prisoner in the dock," said the Crown Counsel, "has, as your lordship knows, pleaded guilty to being concerned in forcible abduction, and the obtaining of money by fraud and violence, set forth in the depositions that have been laid before your lordship. There are therefore, of course, no witnesses to call for the defence, and I submit the case to your lordship for judgment and sentence."

Culebra's yellow face was visible among the spectators in the background. In the gallery,

wrapped in furs, sat Mrs. Garth, her features pale and cold, her eyes inscrutable as the Sphinx.

There was a stir of disappointment among the mass of curious people who thronged the house, when the prosecuting counsel concluded his brief speech. The newspapers had made them hope for thrilling revelations, and the unfolding, step by step, of a story that would make London ring.

Instead, they had heard only the reading of the indictment, with its long rigmarole of legal phrases, followed by those few words from the prosecuting counsel. Apparently, the officers of justice had all the evidence in their hands, and there was no need to thresh it out since the prisoner admitted his guilt. Even the jury, who were empanelled in the box yonder for the day's work, would not be needed for this case. Old habitués of the Bailey, who were familiar with criminal court procedure, understood this. But the bulk of the public did not, and they felt they were being defrauded of a day's pleasure.

The judge, however, did not immediately pronounce sentence. He paused a few moments, and looked across at the Crown Counsel.

"Before following the usual procedure," he said in a clear voice, "I shall say a few words which I consider should be said publicly. I have gone

thoroughly into all the depositions in the case before me, and examined the witnesses concerned, sitting in chambers. The prisoner pleads guilty to the indictment, which, indeed, is clearly proved.

"But, in this case, suffering and momentary loss have not been the only results of a criminal act. It is humanly certain that one, if not two, men are dead, even though the bodies have not been found, and presumably never can be found. It is probable, on the face of it, that the act which caused their deaths was intended to cause the death of another, though happily it failed. It would occur to an impartial observer, therefore, that the Treasury might have considered an indictment against the prisoner for conspiracy in an attempt to commit murder."

The spectators pricked up their ears. There was sensation forthcoming, after all.

"My lord," said the Crown Counsel respectfully, "the point has, I believe, been fully considered, but my instructions were that the charge was not to be proceeded with, as the Treasury decided it could serve no useful purpose. As your lordship has drawn attention to the matter, it will be as well for me to recapitulate briefly the points of the case.

"The lady, who has been the victim of this in-

famous deed, was forcibly abducted while visiting a Woolwich tenement. The motive is obvious—she is the daughter of a very rich woman, Mrs. Garth. She was taken on board a barge anchored in the river. This barge was in the charge of a man called James Vance—a criminal well known to the police.

"Miss Garth had been cruelly gagged, and brought away in such a manner that she saw nothing—and, indeed, was half senseless—till she had been on the barge some time. She was then partially released; she saw her captor, the man Vance, and the police have recognised him from her description. She was kept bound and a prisoner.

"Meanwhile the prisoner, Ducros, Vance's confederate, visited Mrs. Garth at her house, demanded money for her daughter's safety, and eventually proceeded with her to the barge.

"The man, Vance, had, for the purpose of covering all evidence of the crime, arranged an infernal machine and a quantity of explosives in the barge, obviously controlled by a time fuse. The exact intention of this arrangement, and whether it was meant to be an instrument of murder, is now impossible to decide—save on the word of the prisoner, Ducros—for what that is worth. For

both Vance and an unknown man, who was with him, were killed—victims of their own plot. A portion of a charred cap, that has been identified as Vance's, was the only evidence found after the explosion. It is believed that the intention was to destroy the barge, with any human evidence on board it, and escape, in case discovery threatened the two men.

"It is practically certain that Miss Garth would have lost her life, but for the extraordinarily gallant rescue effected by Mr. John Orme, M.P., a friend of the Garth's, who accompanied her to Woolwich. He was able to trace her whereabouts before it was too late; he swam off to the barge, and was attacked by the two ruffians on board. They found Mr. Orme too much for them. He stunned or disabled them both, and found Miss Garth in the cabin, helpless and bound. She was fully aware, however, of the danger that remained; the man, Vance, had evidently set his infernal machinery going, on the alarm being given. Mr. Orme had no notion of exposing the lady to any further risks; he preferred immediately to entrust himself and her to the river, being a strong swimmer—and naturally without troubling himself about the safety of the two scoundrels who were left on board, and who, indeed, soon met the

fate they doubtless intended for him. He and the lady were picked up by a vessel on the river, and so came to safety. That two valuable lives were not lost is due entirely to the courage, quickness, and resource of Mr. Orme—already known as a distinguished soldier and holder of the V.C."

A burst of applause broke out in the court, and, for some time, could not be suppressed. The story of the rescue, more or less correct, had already been blazoned in the newspapers with all the vivid colours that such a journalistic tit-bit called for. Orme himself was in court, packed among a crowd of spectators at the back, and devoutly thankful that he had not been recognised.

"It should be added," said the Crown Counsel, when the court was quiet again, "that the actual abduction was witnessed by a street boy named Flynn. This lad followed the abductors to the barge, and gave information of the whole affair to Mr. Orme, who knew the boy and had more than once befriended him. Thus the tracing was effected. The boy Flynn, who has been examined, has identified the prisoner Ducros—or Latour—as the actual abductor.

"It is certain that Ducros could not have known of this rescue. His was the part of the ransomer

—the collector of the money. He was on his way to the spot with Mrs. Garth, who insisted on being taken to her daughter, when the explosion occurred and the barge was utterly destroyed. A minute later, and both Mrs. Garth and the prisoner would probably have met their death. The prisoner was taken by the River Police, and confessed to the abduction.

"He may have confederates who are still at large, but they played minor parts in the crime, and may yet come to justice. It is considered that their absence cannot affect the present charge, which is fully proved. That, my lord, is an outline of the case, which I have thought it best to repeat. I leave the issue in your hands."

The Crown Counsel sat down.

"He's put it straight enough," murmured a spectator in the court to a man beside him, "though I'd like to have heard more. The prisoner doesn't need trying. Then why does the Crown chap make that speech?"

The man addressed, who was a solicitor's clerk, smiled.

"Oh, for the good of the public and the newspapers, who might think the fellow in the dock ought to be tried for murder. What it means is that the police have failed to get hold of the

prisoner's confederates. So they'll give him his dose, and hope to nab the others later."

The judge looked grimly across at the prisoner.

"Lucien Latour—or Ducros," he said, "you have pleaded guilty to this indictment, and the plea has been accepted. Have you anything to say before I pass sentence upon you?"

Ducros rose quietly and faced the judge.

"I have only this to say, my lord," he replied in a clear, unemotional voice: "I entered into this job well knowing the risks I ran. The whole plot was the work of Jem Vance, I took my orders from him. I was his tool. He showed me how the girl could be kidnapped; I was to do it, deliver her to him, and get the money from her mother. I did it.

"About the explosives on the barge I knew nothing—or I shouldn't have been fool enough to have touched the job. That's not in my line; Vance was an electrician by trade, as the police know. I was the mug; I didn't guess he was doing the dirty on me.

"It's my firm belief that if I'd got on board, with the girl's mother or without her, he'd have done in the barge, and me along with the rest—made a clean sweep and taken all the money for himself. It nearly came off, and I'd be a corpse now, if I'd been a few minutes earlier getting back.

"I was to have had half the money. I got it from Mrs. Garth, and I left it hidden in a place on the wharf, as I've told the police. If they haven't found it, it's because Vance's pals have got it away. They were his lot, not mine, let the police find them. If I could give away anybody who's mixed up in this job, I'd do it—and as for Vance, I wish he was alive to swing! I stand here, not a penny better for it, and bound for a prison; that's all I have to say, and I hope your lordship will take into account that I'm down and out, and have made a clean breast of it."

The judge looked curiously at the prisoner before replying.

"Prisoner in the dock," he said, "whether you have or have not told the truth about your confederates is nothing to the point. Those who are alive may come to justice in their turn. Whether the dead man, Vance, planned your death does not concern me, nor even whether the price of this crime has profited you or not. Neither bonds nor money are current in His Majesty's prisons. But the case is a revelation, even to me, of the type of human beasts that live, in spite of the police, in the dark places of this city.

"You have been guilty of a brutal abduction, the infliction of much suffering, and the robbery

of a large sum of money. Your confession is no condonation, for no successful defence was possible —you were taken in the act.

"The sentence of the court is that you be kept in penal servitude for the term of fourteen years."

There was a buzz of sensation in the court. The prisoner's eyes flickered very slightly, and for a brief moment they met those of Culebra, who was sitting at the back of the court. Ducros turned silently, and was marched out under the care of the warder.

The court rose for the mid-day interval, and the people flocked out, discussing the case eagerly. In a small, empty ante-room near the solicitor's chambers, Mrs. Garth presently arrived, and she was soon joined by John Orme. She held out her hand to him.

"So," she said quietly, "I have failed."

"The brute got off lightly," said Orme. His eyes were hard and grim.

"Who? Ah, you mean the prisoner," said Mrs. Garth listlessly. "No, I think he got more than was expected. I care nothing about him, however. He is not the man that is wanted. With all my resources—and they are great—I have not been able to find any evidence against Craven. But," she added, with a flash in her

eyes, "that may come yet! It is not often that I do not win in the end. You see now, however, how useless your open accusation against Craven would have been."

"I think so, too. But," insisted Orme, "what I cannot understand is this. You tell me the man Ducros is believed to have a sister. It was a woman who impersonated Margaret, and whom I brought back to Mayfair. Why have they not found that woman? Who more likely to be her than this sister of Ducros? If they have found her, why not arrest her? I might identify her."

"Could you?" said Mrs. Garth briefly. "Even after she had left you, you thought she was Margaret. There is an unknown woman at large, and wanted. You think they might arrest this sister of Ducros on suspicion?" She laid a finger on Orme's arm. "I think they have let her slip through their fingers. But there are surer means than that, through which I hope to lay the guilt where it belongs—on Sir Melmoth Craven."

For a moment there was a look in her eyes that almost made Orme shiver. Then, suddenly, she became her natural, charming self.

"Come and see me this afternoon," she said, smiling; "never let it be forgotten what we owe to you. Margaret has come back."

She nodded to Orme, and left the building. He returned very pensively to his chambers, and at four o'clock in the afternoon presented himself at Berkeley Terrace. Orme was shown into the Garths' drawing-room, where he found Margaret awaiting him.

She rose, a swift flush mantling her cheeks, and held out both hands to him with a simple, graceful gesture. He took the hands in his, and held them for a moment. There was a light in her eyes that Orme had never seen before—soft, and wet-shining.

A wonderful thrill went through Orme's heart as his eyes met hers, a thrill of hope, and of love beyond all speech. He released her hands slowly.

"Is there to be no end to the trouble I am giving you?" said Margaret, as she seated herself. "You have been to his—trial? It is all finished?"

"Finished," he replied, "you will have no more worry and harassing. I wish I could have spared it you all."

"But you have," she said, "you and my mother have done everything. I had to answer some questions, when I was well enough, and then they let me go right away."

"It is splendid to see you recovering like this," said Orme; "what pluck you must have! It would

have killed some women." He had met her only once, for an hour, since the tragic night on the river, and for the last eight days had not set eyes on her. "I feared it would affect you terribly, and for a long time to come."

"Ah! The Garths are hard-lived, I think," said Margaret, smiling slightly, "it is difficult to kill them. Do you know what my mother's life has been? And I am her daughter. It was like some frightful nightmare that can never be forgotten. Yet it is past; while others have such courage, I shall try not to be a coward, and let it break me." Her eyes flashed with a sudden fierce pride, that reminded Orme strangely of her mother. "I would not have any enemy of the Garths think I am afraid!"

The light in her eyes changed quickly, and she looked almost timidly at Orme.

"And you," she said gently, "who were so self-sacrificing and splendid, and to whom I owe my life! You will not even let me thank you. You were almost hard to me, when I saw you last and tried."

"I!" he stammered, amazed. "I—hard to you!"

"No—it is not what I mean," she answered swiftly, "but you hated to hear me speak of what

I owed you. Brave men are like that, I suppose. Women have not courage in the way that men have, and it means so much to us. I have seen nothing, but a few lines in a paper."

"You do not want to hear about the trial?" said Orme. "You will wish to forget all that and leave the wretched business to the past. I didn't mean to speak of it."

She hook her head.

"I am not a weakling," she replied, "I want to know what has happened, and is happening. I have good reasons."

Orme told her briefly of what had occurred in court, and the sentencing of Ducros. Margaret looked away, her head bowed.

"Poor wretch!" she said softly.

Orme's lips tightened.

"I would hang that man with my own hands!" he said. The words were wrung from him.

"Still," said Margaret, "think what it means. To be cut off from the world, shut in a cell, herded like a beast—for fourteen years. Is it not a fearful fate? Can you imagine it?"

"It is true," answered Orme, "I would prefer death a hundred times. None the less, for any person that would harm you—for any one that would do the deed that man did—I say that no

punishment ever inflicted on this earth is strong enough!"

Margaret turned, and looked him in the eyes.

"Do you not think," she said slowly, "that sometimes the lesser evil-doers are punished, while those who are more guilty, and still viler, go free? Mr. Orme, I am going to speak frankly to you. Worse things come of silence than of openness, and I will speak, for I know that I speak to a friend. There is another man on whom suspicion rests, and a greater. His name is Sir Melmoth Craven!"

Orme could find no reply. The suddenness of it took the words from his lips. He would not have dared to mention Melmoth Craven to her.

"You are in my mother's confidence, I know," she said. "I wish to ask if you believe it."

"Do you?" was all he could say. Margaret rose to her feet.

"There is no vileness in this world that that man is not capable of!" she said in a low voice. "Don't think it is for myself, or what he did to me —if it was his work—that I say this. He would—" She checked herself quickly, and paused. "I know more of him than you know, or than you ever can."

That was true. But neither did she guess how much Orme did know. Of Mrs. Garth's history

he was ignorant, but the scene he had witnessed on that memorable night when Craven and Margaret were together in the Garths' house was bitten into his memory as acid bites into steel. For Margaret's sake, and to save her from humiliation, he was always in fear she might learn that he had seen it.

"Remember this," said Orme gravely, "that without proof, any accusation would harm your family, and not help it."

"I am well aware of that. But you have not answered my question."

Orme drew a deep breath.

"I know enough of Craven, apart from this, to be sure that no more thorough scoundrel walks the earth," he said, "but he has a cleverness amounting to genius, and nothing has ever been brought home to him. In the present case, what do we know? He has a bitter grudge against your mother, who has denounced him, forbidden him her house, and affected his standing in the world very seriously. But for some reason he dare not proceed openly against her. If it is a hidden blow that he has struck, the man has cloaked it with extraordinary skill."

"Then—you doubt?" said the girl.

Orme rose to his feet.

"Sometimes I doubt his guilt in this instance. Who would not? If guilty, he has an effrontery that is incredible. Miss Margaret, do you know that, either by design or an irony of fate, Sir Melmoth is standing against me in the Westington election! It will be polled in a few days, and, as things are, he is practically staking his career on beating me!"

"Is there any justice on earth?" cried Margaret passionately, "while such a man as that can have wealth, and influence, and power! That he should dare lay claim to a seat in the Government, and the making of laws!"

She stopped suddenly. Mrs. Garth's step was heard outside, and the next moment she entered. The mistress of Garth's was looking far more spirited and care-free—almost her old self. And, as she saw Margaret's shining eyes and heightened colour, her own eyes brightened.

"Is it not heartening to see how she has recovered—how well she is becoming?" said Mrs. Garth to Orme. "Margaret, dearest, you are making me almost happy."

"She is wonderful!" said Orme with enthusiasm. "Your daughter tells me women have not the courage of men. She is wrong. They have it all, and more. I have seen them in shelled hospitals in France, and I know. Heaven bless them for it.

But none had sounder pluck than she has shown—it is not possible."

"We must not turn her head betweeen us," said Mrs. Garth, smiling. "And you, who are always striving and working," she said more gravely, "now that there is a halt in this wretched business, what are your plans?"

"Tomorrow I go down to fight the Westington election against Craven. You know he stands against me?"

"And you shall win!" said Mrs. Garth. "Any influence, any help that I can give, is given. I cannot go myself—perhaps the better for you," she added quietly. "I have work to do—work here in London."

Margaret turned to Orme quickly.

"Why should not *I* go?" she said, with sparkling eyes. "You, who have done so much for me—here is something I can do in return. Women can work at election time. I will go to Westington, and do my share!"

Orme looked at Margaret in amazement. He had never dreamed of this. Yet the thought of having Margaret near him, working with him, and at his side, made his blood race and his heart throb. He looked at her eagerly, then his face fell. Surely it was impossible.

"Well, why not?" said Mrs. Garth decisively, after a moment's pause. "The work will be good for you—it is better than sitting and thinking. All things help in the cause I have at heart."

Her gaze rested judgingly upon Orme.

"You may go, Margaret, if you will. It is quite simple. You can stay with your aunt Lady Dereham; the Dereham's place is not far from Westington. Take any of our cars that you choose. No reason why you should not do good work. But what says Mr. Orme? You are the captain of the campaign. Do you approve?"

"I think it is the greatest honour ever done me," said Orme; "it seems too good to be true. But——"

"Ah! You think I shall be no use," laughed Margaret. She had made him a stately curtsey, and laughed again. "You shall see that the mouse may help the lion!"

She left the room quickly. Orme's face was flushed with pleasure, and his eyes shone. But he turned to Mrs. Garth half doubtingly.

"Do you think this is wise?" he said.

"Certainly I do," was the answer. "What is in your mind? That Craven is there, and that she might be in danger from him? Never in a thousand years! Even a madman would not attempt

such a thing twice. If any good has come of this late ghastly affair, it is that Margaret is safe from him. Even now, confident though he may be, Craven does not know if or when the blow that is to destroy him will fall. You see? Margaret cannot go about the world hiding from Craven. That is finished."

"You are right," said Orme; "I was against the other business, and still blame my folly. This is another matter. Only after what has happened one would expect you to be afraid."

Mrs. Garth faced him.

"Will you think me hard," she said, "when I tell you, though Margaret is all the world to me—though her death would have killed me—I had rather she had died the other night, than that she should show fear of that man Craven. It is how I feel. The Garths are like that. Now, hear me, John Orme. You must win this election!"

"My chances are good," he said, "but it will be a stiffer fight than last time."

"Far stiffer! You had a weak opponent then. Craven has large interests at Westington, with much power, and his seat, Cravenshaw, is in the division. He is not unpopular there, he stands in the Crimson interest, that is his colour, and all the strong Party organisation is behind him. You

are one of the New Party, practically an Indedent. And your side needs money. You must let me help."

"Not one penny!" said Orme firmly, "grateful though I am to you. There are reasons why I can take no help from you. However, Ingram is backing me—a strong man down there, and one who shares my views. But we are not spending much money; I like better to fight without it. Though next time," he added with a smile, "I may be a little better off. You know Westington is a great cotton centre? I am starting a mill there."

"You!" exclaimed Mrs. Garth.

"Yes. I was a mechanical engineer before the war made me a soldier. I've worked out a new spinning-mule, in which I and some others have great belief," said Orme simply. "I haven't said much about it. But it is patented, and some of the machines installed—ready to start work. Do you know anything of cotton-spinning?"

Briefly he told her of the principle of his invention, its cost, and how it would increase production. Mrs. Garth's trained business mind swiftly grasped the money-making possibilities in the thing.

"Why!" she exclaimed, "if it is what you claim, there is a great fortune in this!"

Orme laughed.

"Not for me. I need more money, but I shall draw nothing beyond a fair and proportional amount for my work. You may think me a madman. But my idea, and Ingram's, is a profit-dividing mill, in which men will share fairly with owners. In which men, by their labour, will *become* owners. In the years to come, if my dreams come true, I shall revolutionise Lancashire." He nodded to her. "That is what my enemies call me now—a revolutionist."

"Your scheme is sound," she said quietly, "not by self-seeking alone comes power. But, come back to the present—there is a chance of your defeat at the very outset. Now hear me!" Her voice vibrated fiercely, and her eyes grew cold. "If Craven defeats you, it is my aim to strike him down at the moment of his triumph!"

"Then there will be one villain the less at liberty," replied Orme. He paused. "Mrs. Garth, tell me this. Do you think it possible that, in this Ducros case—we may be wrong about Craven?"

The woman smiled, and looked at him oddly.

"I will let you know that," she said quietly; "information shall reach you at Westington. And now," she added, "leave me to the work I have to do. Go forward to the fight, John Orme!"

He parted with her, and on the staircase met Margaret.

"It is settled," she said, "tomorrow I go to Westington to give what help I can." She held out her hands to him again. "Here is victory—to the Orme colours!"

Orme found it hard to control his voice. He looked her in the eyes.

"Thank you," he said softly, "thank you—little friend!"

He pressed the hands that lay in his, and left the house. There was a wonderful light in his eyes.

"A man cannot bargain for love, nor set the price of a woman's life upon it," he said to himself. "And yet—this miracle is mine—I believe she loves me! I believe she loves me! When I have made good, I shall ask her—the only question in the world that matters. And, if the answer is what I dare to hope, then this black country will be my paradise!"

Orme strode home through the streets to Westminster, his heart singing within him.

CHAPTER XIV

PARTNERS

WESTINGTON was humming with excitement like a stirred wasp's nest. The mills had closed for the day, the streets were clattering from the beat of many thousand clogs; men with shrewd, hard faces and laughing girls with shawled heads thronged the roadways.

The coming election was on every tongue. Westington was a sporting community as well as a political one—it regarded politics rather in the light of a lively dog-fight and would no more have missed it than a cup tie. They liked straight opinions and hard hitting. The walls were blazoned with posters: "Orme for ever." "Vote for Craven and higher piece-rates."

In an open space, fronting some mill-buildings, in one of the busiest parts of the town, stood John Orme, and beside him was Ingram, his friend and backer, a big, blond, strong-jawed man of forty.

"You'll beat him, Orme," said Ingram, "but,

mind this," he drove one big fist into the other palm, "it'll only be by a short neck! Craven's got a strong hold, he's working like a beaver—just as you are—and he's spending money like water."

"Ah!" said Orme, "I reckoned on that. Any chance of his overdoing it, and getting spun out for bribery?"

"Not on your life! He's much too cute. Subscribes fairly, and takes no chances. If he did, his agent, Massingham, would keep him straight quick enough. Massingham's an old hand, and knows every move of the game. It's a duel. There's only yourself, of the New Party, and Craven of the Crimson; the Buff man has withdrawn. But I'm afraid we'll lose a lot of men who plumped for you last time."

"Why?"

"I fear it's on account of our new spinning-mules, lad. They're a great thing. They mean a huge output for less labour, and some of the men think it will lead to unemployment."

"It will mean more men in work than ever," returned Orme—"more labour, more output, more money. Output's what the country needs. Our lads will give it, with those mules, and get a full share for themselves. It's in the contract."

"Right; but the old hands suspect it, and believe it will be their loss."

"I don't blame them," answered Orme. "They've been done too often by their employers. They'd suspect the Angel Gabriel. But it won't be for long. Put a straight, common-sense proposition to a Lancashire man, and he clinches it. I'm Lancashire myself. I always like to see the cards on the table. Our scheme's new yet, and it's been lied about by the other side. The lads will learn the truth when we get busy after the victory."

"In the meantime, it tells against us. The victory's not ours yet. I'm not croaking, Orme, I'm looking things in the face. Who's this coming up? By gad, what a pretty girl!"

A car drove up to the mill-yard gates, and Margaret Garth stepped out, a vision of beauty, her eyes alert and eager.

"So here you are in the thick of the battle!" she said, giving her hand to Orme. "I have been canvassing ever since nine. These Westington cotton-workers are sharp as knives. But they're dear people, and they know true from false. You're winning, Mr. Orme. What can I do now?"

"You see, Ingram, the angels are on my side," said Orme, as he introduced his partner.

"Miss Garth? Why, you're the lady Orme

rescued from those London ruffians!" said Ingram, and he took her little hand in his huge paw and shook it delightedly.

"That is right," said Margaret, smiling and flushing.

"This is splendid!" exclaimed Ingram, "you'll be worth a battalion to us!"

"That's absurd," said Margaret. "Nobody will take any notice of me. But I haven't even heard Mr. Orme speak yet. There's a meeting assembling now, isn't there? I want to come on the platform and watch it. You'll let me, Mr. Orme?"

"Anything in the world that you wish to do," replied Orme. But, in spite of the joy of feeling that she was near him, he looked uncomfortable. "Look here, Ingram, none of your tricks. I won't have a word about that matter. I don't fight an election on a war ribbon, and having given a little help to a lady, and that sort of thing."

Margaret's charming chin raised itself a little, and she looked at him with remarkable obstinacy.

"I shan't make speeches about it," she said, "but whoever asks me will be told the truth. And I'm going to be there!"

"That's right, Miss Garth," said Ingram emphatically, "don't you listen to any of Orme's

nonsense. A man should have whatever credi due to him, I say, and your presence here in its is a big ally on our side. But let's be moving never keep electors waiting."

As they passed together through the bu square, a sound of cheering was heard from a l building not far away, that had the Crims colours displayed, and Craven's posters placard on it.

"Sir Melmoth is addressing a meeting there said Ingram, "and you can tell by the row th he's got a big following. All the mill-owners a a lot of the minders are on his side."

"That's more than any one would dare to be I could tell the truth about him," said Or grimly, "but come on and let's see if we can sh him a bigger deal."

They arrived in the great bare hall where Orm meeting was held. It was crowded and throng already, the street outside was overflowing. Or went in by a side door with his companions; the platform were several of his supporters, w greeted him warmly. There was little show flag-dressing. The executive looked just what was—a party fighting a strong battle on its o merits, without display or any surplus of mone

Orme's arrival was the signal for a storm

lusty cheering from deep-throated Westington voices; only those who have heard mill-hands cheer can imagine it. It died down, but on Margaret's arrival upon the platform every eye in the room was directed at her, and a swift buzz of questions passed among the audience, evidently finding replies.

Then the cheering broke out tenfold. The audience fairly rose at Margaret. Ten days before, the story of Ducros' villainy and Orme's rescue had filled England. Now, the Westington evening papers, flooding the streets only half an hour since, carried an account of Margaret Garth, and her presence in Westington. Even her photograph, that every journal had a copy of since the Ducros case, was published. She was recognised instantly, and the enthusiasm was immense.

"Eh! She's a bonny lass!" cried a mill-girl. "Good luck to her an' young Orme!"

"Hurray for Johnny Orme an' t' laady!" roared a big "piercer." "He beat t' Huns an' beat t' Lunnon rogues. Show us t' chap that can down him!"

Orme turned anxiously and looked at Margaret. This was just what he had feared—how would she stand it? Margaret's face was warmly flushed, but she returned Orme's almost reproachful glance and laughed, happily and rebelliously.

The truth is that Margaret had foreseen it all, and had herself set it afoot. A Westington newspaper man had found her, and she gave him all the information she thought would be helpful. The swarming meeting, and this wild enthusiasm, were the results. Though she disliked publicity and shrank from it, Margaret let nothing stand in her way that could help the man to whom she owed her life. The Garths were always wholehearted allies to their friends.

The meeting roared for a speech from "t' laady," and begged her to come forward. But there was no need for Margaret to speak—her presence was enough. And her heart was beating so fast and wildly, that she could not have uttered a word. It was Orme that broke in.

"For goodness' sake lead off, Ingram, and stop this!" he said, "it is cruelty!"

"Lads o' Westington!" cried Ingram in a voice like a bugle, using the broad Lancashire that he always dropped into when addressing a crowd, "here's your champion, tried an' true! You know what's he done. You sent him to the House, an' he made good. He won t' seat last time, an' he's fettle to do it again! You don't want to listen to my clack, you want to hear John Orme. Come on, lad, let's have it."

There was silence as Orme's tall figure stepped to the front. In a few brief sentences he led off. He said nothing about himself, and scarcely a word about his rival. He spoke of the work that he stood for, the creed that he and those that strove with him had brought to the front, and the mighty future that lay before Westington and England. The forces of evil which barred that progress, the greed, the profit-forcing, and the treachery, he smote as with a flaming sword.

In two minutes he had gripped the audience; in five, he carried them with him like one man. The whole great crowd in the hall hung upon his words, five hundred pairs of eyes were riveted on his, and every few minutes a crash of applause answered the points that he drove home. He spoke like a man inspired.

Margaret, who had never heard Orme speak in public, listened spellbound, her lips parted, her eyes shining, her hands clenched together. It made her own heart beat swiftly to see Orme carry with him the hearts of men—to hear him rousing that great gathering of hard, shrewd north countrymen and rallying them to him as a trumpet rallies a squadron. He was one of them, appealing to the great gods called truth and common-sense—but with a strange fire and passion that

carried all before it. Here, indeed, was a king among men.

The address ended amid wild enthusiasm, and then the questions began. It was no packed meeting, but free to all, and many of Craven's supporters were in the hall. Orme was heckled freely. A drum-fire of stiff posers was shot at him. He gave a ready reply to every one. There was a fighting punch to his answers, and a swift wit that brought a roar of laughter at the heckler's expense. It was such a scene as the cotton-spinners loved. The meeting ended with echoing cheers for Orme, and again for Margaret.

Ingram brought them both away by a strategic escape through the side door. He was rubbing his big hands with delight.

"It goes magnificently!" he said. "I see you heading the poll, Orme. And you, Miss Garth—I could tell you what big work you've done for us tonight. Whose car is this?"

"Mine," said Margaret, stepping into a landaulette that had drawn up at the door. "I must go back now. Mr. Orme, I have seen enough to know that you need no woman's help. But I shall work all the harder." She was about to give the order to the chauffeur, but checked herself.

"How foolish of me to forget! I called at your

hotel but you were out. This letter was there for you, and I brought it. I should have had to come back and find you."

She handed him the letter. It was in Mrs. Garth's handwriting. Orme tore it open and read. There were but two lines.

"Evidence still wanting. But I am absolutely certain now that Craven is the man who paid Ducros."

Orme's eyes grew hard as flint. He thrust the note into his pocket. A question that Ingram put to him went unanswered. For, at that moment, Orme saw Margaret's face suddenly change, and he followed the direction of her eyes.

Threading slowly through the crowded street, followed by some cheering, came a large open car. In it Sir Melmoth Craven stood upright, smiling, and acknowledging the cheers.

As he came abreast Margaret and Orme, he caught sight of them both. He turned deliberately to face them, and his smile changed to a cold, insolent sneer.

Orme's blood grew hot, despite himself he felt every muscle in his body quiver as he returned that look. A longing for a more primitive combat than electioneering took hold of him. But the

car passed on, and it was Margaret's touch on his arm that recalled him to himself.

"You can afford to despise it," she said quietly. "What is my mother's message?"

Orme looked at her.

"Guilty," he said in as low a tone.

Margaret drew a quick breath. Then she nodded to him, and signed to the chauffeur to start.

"I will be with you in the morning," she said, and her car moved off in the opposite direction.

Ingram, who wanted to return to the mill, plucked at Orme's sleeve. But the young man did not at once respond. A black mood was upon him. The look that Craven cast at Margaret had maddened Orme. Why, he asked himself, was he here contesting the polls against this man, whose right place was a felon's cell. Had the world gone mad, that there was no justice upon Craven?

It was at this moment that an active, dapper little man with a neat beard and a fussy manner came out of the crowd and made straight for Orme. It was Massingham, Sir Melmoth's election agent, a local pillar of the party. He held out a gloved hand to Orme.

"Ah! Here is our opponent!" he said in a frank, slightly patronising manner. "How are you,

Mr. Orme? I don't like your politics, you know—but I hope we shall have a straight fight."

It seemed as though Orme's blood had turned to gall. There was something in the tone and speech that suddenly roused him to fierce anger.

"A straight fight! What do you mean?" he said, turning on the man grimly. "Are you here to make excuses for yourself, then?"

The dapper little Massingham reddened, and stepped back.

"Excuses! Our side does not need excuses, Mr. Orme," he said pompously. "I am working for Sir Melmoth Craven."

"Then," said Orme fiercely, "you are working for the worst blackguard in England, sir. And, doubtless, you are tarred with the same brush!"

"This is an outrage!" gasped Mr. Massingham; "you will get your answer——"

"Chuck t' whipper-snapper in mill-dam if he don't shut up!" said a voice loudly; "who's thou to speak agen John Orme!"

Before Orme could prevent, some of the rougher element were hustling Massingham. Instantly a counter-cry broke out from the Craven supporters, and some of them made a rush.

"Down wi' Orme! Chuck out t' humbugs wi' t' new-fangled mules!"

In a few moments there was a lively little riot in full swing. Passions had already run high, and the spark became a flame. Fists were used, and the square began to look like a big football scrimmage. The police took instant action, and had some difficulty in restoring quiet. A path was made for Massingham and he was got away, sorely ruffled, with a crumpled dent in his hat.

Orme's nostrils were cracking, the fighting-light was in his eyes, and he looked as though he were about to go through the crowd like a bull through a hedge. Ingram laid a firm grip on his wrist.

"Steady, lad! This won't do. Come away or there'll be trouble."

He managed to withdraw his champion as far as the mill from which they had started, and got him inside.

The disturbance was dying down.

"You've made a blunder," said Ingram. "Massingham's absolutely honest. He meant no harm."

"Then he deserves whatever comes to him for being in such shady employment!" said Orme savagely.

"He does not believe Craven is shady. There's no straighter fellow in Westington than Massingham. I say that though he's against us. He only meant that he hoped we'd get a fair show, and

that none of the rowdies on either side would play any tricks. His manner's irritating I know."

Orme's wrath subsided as suddenly as it had arisen.

"I'm sorry, Ingram," he said, "I know my temper's explosive at all times, and just then I was all on edge. Even you don't know what that hound Craven really is, and what torment I go through when I see him. I was rough on Massingham, perhaps. As a matter of fact, I was going to sail in and wipe up those toughs who were hustling him. I don't like that sort of thing."

"Glad to hear you say so, lad. The thing will be used by the other side, and may do us harm. I think you should apologise. It's often done."

"I'll apologise to no living soul who works on Craven's side, whether he's called honest or not!" returned Orme emphatically. "I'd as soon apologise to Beelzebub! I've told you I'm sorry about Massingham, and that's enough. Let's change the subject. How is the mill going?"

"Excellently. The first batch of your mules are installed, the power's in, and we're ready to start work in a fortnight."

"Good. Here's what I think," said Orme, "it's promised as a big thing, but I feel we should engage no men, nor even make contracts with them, till the

election's over. It might look like corruption, and endanger the seat."

"Quite right," approved Ingram. "I've got a dozen workers we can't do without, and Linke looks after them, but I'll take no more till after the polls. We've half an hour to spare, and I want you to go into these papers with me."

They were interrupted during their conference in the office by Mr. Simon Linke. He was overlooker and temporary manager in the new mill, a thin-faced, keen-eyed man, and though he had little work to do as yet, looked sullen and harassed.

He came on a business errand, which was soon settled. He then turned to Ingram, and his manner was a queer mixture of independence and nervousness.

"See here, Mr. Ingram," he said, "I've a request to make to you, which you can grant or refuse. But, if you turn it down, I don't know what I shall do. You've engaged me here at a salary. I'm a capable man—none more so in the town. But I'm in a tight place—for money.

"Unless I can get three hundred, things will go badly for me. It's a mess I got into before I joined with you. You're a man that's well off. Will you advance me a loan of three hundred pounds? I've not much security to offer. But

I'll pay you back," he said eagerly, "as sure as I'm a living man! And I'm yours to command for the rest of my life. I'll work for you like a nigger. And," he added, "I've a bit of a pull with the men, and I'll pull my whole weight, too, for this election."

Ingram's lips tightened. He met his partner's eyes, and Orme shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Linke," said Ingram briefly. "You should know better than to make such a request at this of all times! Even to help a man who is down, we're not going to pile up that sort of evidence against ourselves. I daresay you've had hard luck, but you've made a false step. It's out of the question."

"You refuse?" said Linke. His face was strained and his forehead damp. He had evidently counted on being helped.

"I refuse absolutely."

"That means you don't trust me," muttered the man.

"To show that I trust you," replied Ingram, taking his cheque-book, "here is a draft for fifty pounds, which you will cash and pay the wages due to our small staff, as usual. I wouldn't put that into the hands of a man I didn't trust. But for yourself, at the present time, not a penny ex-

cept what's due to you for work. Good evening, Linke."

Linke took the cheque and departed without a word.

"You say you trust that man," said Orme, who had been watching Linke keenly. "I don't, Ingram. I don't like his eyes. And his hint about the men was enough. I'm used to judging men, and he's not straight."

"I've not studied him much, but I think he is. He can't well bolt with the cheque. He'd lose his job for a trifle."

"I didn't mean that. But I don't like the man, and he's not the sort I like to see in our concern."

"Well, we'll settle that later. It's only a side show. Finish signing these papers, Orme, and we'll draw up your programme for tomorrow. It will be our big day."

Meanwhile, Mr. Simon Linke, making his way homewards to his little house in the suburbs, wore an extremely bitter and vicious expression on his sharp features.

"Turned down, eh?" he said to himself grimly. "You smug pair of fools, it's you that slipped up, not me! Wouldn't have hurt either of you to help me through. But I can sell my goods in another market, unless I'm mistaken in Craven.

"I've got to have that money. And, when I've earned it, there'll be a quick finish for you, Mr. Prig Orme. Your number's up!"

. . . . . .

Sir Melmoth Craven reclined in one of the saddle-bag chairs in his comfortable suite at the White Rose Hotel, after an exhausting but, apparently, triumphant day. His world, and particularly murky Westington, seemed to him to glow with rosy colours. He was winning.

With him, stoically refusing a brandy and soda that had been offered, sat Mr. Massingham, the agent. It was twenty-four hours since Mr. Massingham had encountered John Orme in the street, and he seemed fully to have recovered from the rudeness he had met with.

"A good day, Sir Melmoth, and things have gone well for us," he said. "Mr. Orme did himself a lot of harm by that gross attack on me, and we have quietly made the most of it—aided by the press on our side."

"We ought to have done a great deal more of that, Massingham!" said Craven, sitting up. "I wanted to go for that man Orme, tooth and nail, from the beginning. It is my first chance to talk back at him. He is a cur and a sneak."

At that moment there was a light tap on the door. It was opened before Craven could answer, and a man glanced in. It was Mr. Simon Linke. He entered and shut the door behind him.

"Might I have a word with you, sir?" he said.

Craven was angry. He thought himself safe from intrusion after canvassing hours, and wondered how the man had got in unannounced. But his brow cleared, and he looked at the visitor keenly.

"You are from the Ingram and Orme Mills, are you not?" he said. "I know your face."

"I am, sir," said Linke. "I've something to say that you might, perhaps, like to hear. I can only say it, though, in a place where we shall not be disturbed. I should not like anybody I know to come in and see me here. But, sir," he added, "if you cannot hear me, I will go away."

There was a pause, and Linke knew that the pause would be a test. He had his own private opinion about Sir Melmoth Craven. If he was wrong, he realised that Sir Melmoth would turn him out.

Sir Melmoth looked at the man frankly, yet sternly, and drew himself up with some haughtiness. Few men could show a nobler presence.

"I would have you to know," he said, "that for

me, English politics can shine only in the pure, bright light of publicity and rectitude. Nothing secret or underhand can ever be countenanced. A statesman's honour is as dear to him as a woman's."

Having said this, Sir Melmoth led the way into the snug little room at the end, which formed an annex to the large apartment. Mr. Linke followed without a word.

When they were inside, Sir Melmoth closed the door and made a sign towards a chair. They both seated themselves. Mr. Linke hesitated, and seemed at a loss how to begin. Sir Melmoth got over the difficulty for him.

"You are engaged, I presume," he said, "at the mill in which the new Orme mules are installed."

"I am, sir," said Mr. Linke deprecatingly.

"It should, if all goes well, prove a very profitable berth for you," said Sir Melmoth pleasantly.

"Some think so, sir," said Linke, "I don't. I've some experience, and I believe the thing is as likely to be a frost as not. Anyhow, it's not much good to me, and, at the best, will be a long time before it shows returns."

"You have a wisdom beyond your years, Mr.—er——?"

"Linke, sir. Simon Linke."

"Mr. Linke. There is, of course, an element of uncertainty in all commercial enterprises—just as there is in elections."

"Yes, sir." Mr. Linke was watching his host's face with quiet yet careful scrutiny. "Well, Sir Melmoth, you have spoken to me like an honest civil gentleman, if I may say so, and your views on politics, sir, are just what an Englishman likes to hear. I won't beat about the bush and waste your time, sir. I'm very badly stuck for three hundred pounds. Just as badly as a man can be. I could give value for it, too. I've asked my employers, who could well afford to help me, and they've refused."

"You see, Mr. Linke," said Sir Melmoth, with a shrug and a gesture of his white hand, "the purity of politics again. You are not a football club, or a Fresh Air Fund, you know. You are a man, I gather, with some little influence in your way."

"I am, sir," said Linke, cunningly, "in my way. As overlooker and temporary manager, I shall have the job of picking some of the 'minders' that will work on those new mules—a berth that's considerable sought after by a good many."

He paused and lowered his voice a little.

"It is my idea, sir, that if I gave a written promise of engagement to ten of those 'minders' that I'd pick out, and a five pound note—I could ensure their voting for Mr. Orme."

Craven turned, and looked him in the face.

"You are, of course, joking, Mr. Linke," he said, "such a proposal is shocking in the extreme. You cannot have suggested it to Mr. Orme or any of his agents?"

"No, sir, I did not."

"So I should think. If they were so dishonest as to agree to such a thing—or even if it were done without their sanction, and the affair leaked out, what then? Why, should Mr. Orme win, he would lose his seat and be thrown down to a certainty!"

Simon Linke leaned forward.

"Quite so, sir," he said slowly, "and to repay him an' his partner for their great kindness to me, I've a mind to do it on my own account, using the position I have—and win those votes for him! Mr. Orme will beat you, sir. And, in the case I mention, he'll have his seat in Parliament all right —for about twenty-four hours."

Sir Melmoth looked at Mr. Linke, and Mr. Linke looked at Sir Melmoth. Then the visitor turned his eyes away and regarded the carpet.

"I could do it easily," he murmured, "for three

hundred—and the fifty for exes. It's worth four hundred. Say three now and another after the election. I'd work it clever. I'd like to do Mr. Orme a good turn."

Sir Melmoth rose from his chair, and once more drew himself to his full height.

"Mr. Linke!" he said, proudly and very coldly, "I scarcely understand your proposal. But there is clearly something in it which is not perfectly straightforward and above-board. I wish you good-night. I would rather lose a hundred seats than do anything which could in the slightest degree tarnish the high name which politics bear in this country. What did you say your address was?"

Mr. Linke scribbled it on a piece of paper, which he handed to Sir Melmoth, who slipped it into his waistcoat pocket.

"English statecraft," said Sir Melmoth, "is a synonym of honour and morality. The first duty of us all is to preserve these as spotless as they have always been. That is the way out, Mr. Linke. Be careful that you are not observed as you leave the house. I do not wish to meet with you again."

Mr. Linke left the room. There was nobody about, and he made a deft and cautious exit by the

back entrance of the hotel. On his way homeward through the dark streets, he rubbed his hands together and chuckled delightedly.

"Backed a winner this time," he said to himself, "what a lad!"

Sir Melmoth, left alone, reflected for as long as it took to finish an excellent cigar. Then he went to his bedroom, and took from his valise a locked leather and steel case in which were bank-notes amounting to over five hundred pounds, in various values.

He selected three notes of a hundred, and ten of five pounds each. With paper and string he carefully enclosed them in a simple little parcel that might have contained handkerchiefs or tobacco, and, choosing a plain scrap of paper, typed Linke's name and address on it with the machine that stood in his room, and affixed the label to the parcel.

Half an hour later the little parcel dropped through the letter-box at Mr. Linke's house, and in due course came safely into that gentleman's ingenious hands.

CHAPTER XV

THE VICTOR

THE hour arrived. Expectation was strained to breaking-point in Westington. It was like the finish of a great horse-race. The polls had long been closed, counting was nearly completed. At any moment the result might be announced. The big square was thronged.

In his rooms at the Bell Hotel stood Orme, quiet and confident. Ingram was there also. Margaret Garth was at the window, looking down at the crowds. She was a little pale, and her face showed an eager, strained excitement. Ingram looked as if the stress of the contest had tired him.

"It's all over by now," he said, "in a minute or two we shall know. By Jove, Orme—I wonder why we do this, after all? For the sake of a seat in Westminster, and four hundred pounds! What's it all mean—to business men?"

Margaret, at the window, turned sharply.

"For the Cause!" she said, "for Right, against Wrong! That's why we shall win."

"I've known wrong come up on top often," said Ingram a little moodily. "It's wrong as a rule that has the fat bank book and the Rolls Royce. Hullo!"

The telephone bell rang, and Ingram hurried to the instrument. There was direct communication to the Town Hall, where the ballots were counted. It was not the rule at Westington for the candidates to be present at the Hall during the count.

"Results through?" exclaimed Ingram, as he grasped the receiver; "let's have 'em—quick!"

In the slight pause that followed, Margaret stepped suddenly to Orme's side.

"Ah! I do so want you to win!" she said in a low, swift voice, "but, if you fail——"

Her hand, that rested on the table, trembled a little. Orme took it in his, his heart thrilled at the touch. Before he could speak there was a yell that a Sioux Indian would have envied from Ingram at the telephone.

"You're in, lad!" he shouted, "you've done it on Craven!"

Hoarsely he called out the figures as they came through:

ORME.....	6352
CRAVEN.....	6200
Majority.....	152

Ingram turned from the instrument, and the next moment all three were gripping hands. Margaret's eyes glowed with happiness and triumph—she was more radiant than Orme had ever seen her.

"Isn't it splendid—glorious!" she cried, "the victory's ours, and who says now that Right cannot win against wrong!" She turned to Orme. "This is a day of days!"

"It is so," cried Ingram, "and, by all the powers, Miss Garth, Orme can thank you for it! In by only a hundred and fifty votes. You've won us more than that, and, if you hadn't stood beside Orme in the fight, as sure as I live we'd have lost!"

"It is true!" exclaimed Orme, turning to Margaret, who laughed and shook her head. Before another word could be said, a swarm of Orme's principal supporters burst into the room, eager to congratulate him. Lancashire folk let themselves go on occasions like this. But the noise in the room was quickly drowned by a louder one from without.

The news had come through to the crowds in the square, and the cheering rose to a deep-mouthed

roar. From below could be heard yells of "Orme! Johnny Orme! Come out an' show thysen!"

"They're on to it," laughed Ingram. "Go and hand them the goods, lad. They'll shake the place down if you don't."

Orme went to the open windows, and, despite her protest, led Margaret with him. The uproar then became absolutely deafening.

"An' a bonny pair they make!" screamed a pretty mill-girl shrilly, waving her shawl. "Good luck to t' lass! Johnny Orme wins twice over!"

Margaret escaped back into the room, laughing and blushing. There was a sparkle in her eyes that not even Orme saw. When he could get a hearing, he addressed the crowd in a few straight words, and thanked them for his victory. They had stood by him, he said, and he swore to stand by them in turn. That was all.

At that moment there was a diversion. The car of the defeated candidate came slowly threading its way through the crowds, down the centre of the square.

"Here's owd Craven!" cried a score of voices. There was some cheering and some hissing. Sir Melmoth perfectly calm and serene, stood up in the car. The noise abated, for there were many who were curious to know what he had to say.

"Electors of Westington!" said Sir Melmoth in a carrying voice, "I thank you. I am defeated but I bear no grudge against the opposition. It has been a close fight, and, I hope, an honest one. I can take my beating like an Englishman."

There was some applause at this, and the car passed on.

"Sportsman, anyhow," remarked one of the men in Orme's room.

"Is he?" said Ingram dryly; "when Melmoth gets mealy-mouthed, it means dirty work somewhere, if you ask me." He little guessed how precisely accurate his words were.

"Well, he's got his licking, anyhow," said the man who had spoken, "he's down and out."

Orme turned away, and his lips tightened.

"I'm very far from having done with that snake in the grass yet," he said quietly. "I'll not rest till he has his deserts."

"Aye," said Ingram, "but you've made a good beginning." He laid a hand on Orme's arm. "Don't forget, lad, you've to be in London tonight. It's rough, but this mill business of ours must be clinched."

"Right. Time I was off," replied Orme, "I shall keep these rooms on. Back in two days."

Margaret was listening, and her face fell.

"I hoped you would come back with me to Lady Dereham's," she said, "and that we should celebrate your victory."

Orme ook her hands in his.

"I would give anything to come," he said, low and earnestly, "but there is no escape from this wretched journey. I cannot let old Ingram down. Will you be here," he pleaded, "when I come back?"

"I shall wait for you," said Margaret simply.

An hour later Orme sat in the train speeding southwards through the dusk. His heart glowed with an overpowering joy and faith. But it was not his triumph at the polls that filled his mind, nor the first defeat of Craven. It was the vision of Margaret's sweet face that seemed to float before him with that look in her eyes that made his heart beat and filled him with the hope that he had not dared put into words.

"When I return, I shall ask her," he said to himself, "and, if this miracle has happened—if she does care for me—then I am crowned above all men. Margaret, my darling, it is for you I am fighting—not for fame nor vengeance!"

. . . . . .

Sir Melmoth had returned to his luxurious rooms at the White Rose, and was listening, affable but

bored, to the condolences of various supporters. Every one of them, with the air of saying something strikingly original, assured him he had won "a moral victory." When the last one had gone he smiled gently and mixed himself a drink.

"'Moral victory' is good," he said thoughtfully; "morals were never exactly my long suit. Nor is it an adjective I should apply to what is coming."

"When will it come, I wonder?" he added, choosing a cigar; "very soon, if I'm not mistaken. The worthy Linke has had his additional hundred. And an inkling has been thrown in Massingham's way. If that strictly honest person is as keen as I take him to be, he won't be long following it up. If there's a hitch, and I don't get this seat, I'm done. Everything depends on it."

He thought it over, watching the wreaths of smoke from his cigar through half-closed eyes, when there was a hurried footstep outside, and Massingham bustled in. The chief agent looked unusually agitated, and his keen little face shone with excitement.

"Sit down, Massingham, and accept my thanks," said Craven amiably, "but don't tell me I've won a moral victory."

"I haven't come to talk humbug of any description, Sir Melmoth!" exclaimed Massingham. "As

sure as I live, I believe we shall see you member for Westington this session, even now!"

Sir Melmoth feigned amazement, and did it very well. He asked what Massingham could possibly mean.

"I mean there's been such dirty work on the other side," said the agent, "that Orme will be unseated to a certainty! I'll tell you. I've got a lot of sharp men who keep a good lookout for anything of that sort. And one of them has smelt a rat. He's got a clue that voters have been given fat jobs in Orme's mill, and even paid money on the understanding they should vote for him. And they've done it! Mind, this is between ourselves for the moment. I'm on the track of some solid proofs, and the moment I get them, in goes our petition!"

"Ah! Didn't I tell you at first that Orme was a knave?" said Craven, "though I never suspected this. A man who would tamper with the purity of voting is capable of anything!"

"I doubt even now whether Orme knew or countenanced it!" said Massingham, "the thing's too crude. More likely some fool on his side has done it for him, thinking to help him. But that unseats him just the same."

"Will there be enough bought votes to wipe out

his majority then?" said Craven, with apparent innocence. "He has a hundred and fifty——"

"That doesn't matter a button!" exclaimed Massingham impatiently, "if there has been bribery and corruption of any sort proved, his election is void, and the seat goes to you as the next highest! I'm off now to get those proofs, and they're as good as in my hands! Thank your stars, Sir Melmoth, that you fought an honest, clean fight!"

Massingham hurried out, full of zeal. Sir Melmoth lay back in his chair and took a long draught at his cigar.

"I never laid out four hundred and fifty pounds to better purpose," he murmured.

. . . . . .

Forty-eight hours later, Orme, travel-stained and anxious, burst into the office of the mill. He had spent the night in the down train.

"What on earth is this, Ingram?" he exclaimed. "I got your wire! How has this disaster fallen on us?"

"I can hardly look you in the face, lad," groaned Ingram. "You were right about that man Linke. Whether he's knave or fool, I'm not sure. It seems he engaged men on a profit-sharing job in our mill, and even paid them money, on the understanding

they'd vote for you. They've done it. Craven's side have found it out. Petition already in on a charge of bribery. There's the case packed small."

Orme was dumbfounded.

"I've sent for Linke, and you shall question him yourself," said Ingram. "Here are my notes on what he did."

Orme went through them hastily with a grave face, and Linke was announced. He came in, looking sullen and apologetic.

"I've but one question for you, Linke," said Ingram savagely, "how did you dare engage and bribe these men in the face of our direct orders."

"I—I can't deny it, sir," stammered Linke, "but I never thought it was bribery. I thought I was helping you. You said the election'd be a close thing. And—I believed you intended me to do something of the sort. You see, I'd more or less a free hand. And you gave me that cheque for fifty pounds. There was more than enough to pay the ordinary wages. I though it was meant, sir."

"Meant!" roared Ingram, "you unblushing liar! You were told in this room, that on no account was anything to be done of the sort. Orme is my witness!"

"You did say something like that, sir," muttered

Linke, shuffling, "but—I thought you meant it the other way. That's the truth. You wouldn't lend me that money I asked for, but, of course, I bore no grudge for that. You see, sir, I thought if I could help you a bit, I thought you might let me have that money after the election. Things have got mixed up, and I'm sorry. I thought you'd like me to do what I did. I can't see how they got to know of it."

Ingram started up, crimson in the face, and looking so dangerous that Linke shrank back. Orme broke in.

"I have nothing to say to you, Linke," he said bitterly, "but this. Tell your tale to the commission of inquiry, and tell the truth! I will have no word with you. Give him a cheque for his salary, Ingram, and let us be rid of him."

Ingram dashed off a draft, and flung it to the man.

"Go quickly!" he said grimly, "for it is all I can do to keep my hands off you!"

Linke took the cheque and escaped hurriedly. Orme looked at his partner.

"Will they throw me out for this?" he said wearily; "we never countenanced it. I would as soon pick a man's pocket!"

"It depends what view the Commission takes,"

replied Ingram; "there is a chance for us yet, maybe. But a poor one. It doesn't matter whether we authorised the bribery or not. If it's done on our side, we have to suffer."

Orme rose.

"Do you think there's treachery in this?" he said slowly.

"Heaven knows. But I don't see how. The man is our employee, paid by us, and on your side in politics. That's the fatal part. We'll do all we can, and hope for the best."

The most stringent research work was done, but without much effect. In three days the inquiry was held before the Justices. There was little delay, for the case was too clear. All parties concerned gave their evidence. Linke's attitude was one of frank admission and penitence. He did not attempt to throw the blame on Orme, which would have been quite useless.

It is needless to give details of the inquiry. There was no getting away from the fatal fact that voters had been won by bribery of a flagrant sort. Linke received a very severe handling from the Justices, and had generally a warm time of it. But, unfortunately, there could be no penalty for what he had done. He was Orme's employee, and the elected candidate must be the one to

suffer. The Chairman gave his decision after consultation.

"We find the charge of bribery clearly proved," he said. "The election of Mr. Orme for Westington must be declared void. I desire to put it on record that no stigma rests on Mr. Orme's personal conduct in the opinion of the court. He appears to have done all he could to ensure an honest contest. We must regard him as unfortunate. But English law requires absolute freedom of the ballot from any proved corruption, when an Englishman takes his seat in Parliament as the elected representative of the people. The election of Mr. Orme must be declared void."

That evening the newspapers in Westington and throughout England gave prominence in their columns to the result:

ELECTION BRIBERY AT WESTINGTON.

MR. ORME UNSEATED.

SIR MELMOTH CRAVEN SITS FOR THE DIVISION.

The iron entered John Orme's soul. A hundred times more bitter was this than if he had merely been beaten at the polls. His enemy, vile though Orme knew him to be, was triumphant, and the

work that Orme was pledged to carry out for his party would be left undone.

After seeing Ingram, he denied himself to all others, and remained alone. Sympathy or pity would have driven him mad. And while he was in this mood, a note came from Dereham Hall, asking him to go there at once.

Though every fibre of his being thrilled to the summons, though the thought of Margaret drew him like a loadstone, Orme was on the point of refusing. What right had he to go there now? There was a train to town in an hour—he would get away, and plunge into hard work as relief. He sat down to write a note.

He picked up the letter from Dereham Hall again, read it through—and altered his mind. A rare thing with him. With a heavy sigh he tore up the note he had written, and left for Dereham.

The place was only two miles out of Westington. When Orme arrived he was received by Lady Dereham, a charming, white-haired old lady, who cared less than nothing for politics, but was full of white-hot indignation over Orme's disaster.

"M.P.'s!" she cried cynically, "most of 'em rogues—all of them bores! Two of my brothers in the House, and three cousins. Don't know what party they call themselves—but they're in

all right. And you—the only honest man I know—you're turned down. Think yourself lucky, John Orme. Too clean for that place!"

Orme smiled grimly as he shook hands with her. Lady Dereham had been a good friend to him at Westington.

"Why, man, I believe you've taken it to heart!" she said, looking at him. "What for? There's bigger work in front of you—yes, and better things. But you don't want to hear an old woman chattering. I'll fetch somebody who'll teach you sense!"

She left the room abruptly, and a minute later Margaret came in—Margaret, more gloriously beautiful than ever. Her eyes were soft and liquid as she came towards him.

"Dare I tell you how sorry I am?" she said.

The pity, which from all others maddened Orme, made his heart throb like a violin when he saw it in Margaret's eyes. He caught his breath.

"I had no right to come here," he answered.

"No right? Why?"

"Because I am beaten," he said dully, "and disgraced."

"Disgraced? I will not hear you say it!" she cried, "no, nor beaten! And this last thing—who can say it is any fault of yours?"

"I feel it so, none the less," he said bitterly;

"the thing was done in my name. Worse than that—I have failed you. This scoundrel, who has done you such wrong, has triumphed. This was to have been the first step to his downfall. And now I am the loser."

"And I, who know," said Margaret with intense earnestness, "say that you fought a splendid and clean fight, and are the victor. Tell me," she said eagerly, "for I cannot believe this is the end —is there no chance for an appeal? Or another election?"

He shook his head.

"Neither. I have looked into that. The evidence forbids it. Well," he added slowly, "I hope I've pluck enough left not to whine uselessly. There's other work before me. I'll go and do it."

Margaret looked at him, her eyes large and troubled. A barrier seemed to have come between them, and thrust them far apart.

"But one memory I have to help me," said Orme, "the splendid loyalty and friendship you showed me all through. The brief victory I had, I owed to you!" His voice vibrated. "If you knew how glorious that was. It was worth the defeat a hundred times!" His voice fell again, and he turned away. "Good-bye then, Margaret, I must get to work."

"Is that all?" she said quietly. Her eyes met his, and he turned back. Her cheeks were flushed faintly pink. A woman would have known that she was near to tears.

"How can I put my thanks into words?" he answered sadly. "It is all I dare to say—now."

Margaret came a step nearer.

"Had this thing not happened," she said, hardly above a whisper, "then—would it have been all?"

"No!" cried Orme, as if the words were torn from him. "I had a question then, more than all the world to me! I should have asked you to be my wife. For I love you, Margaret—I love you —I love you!"

The next moment, without knowing how it happened, he found his arms round Margaret—he held her to him with a wild incredible joy. Their lips met.

"Ah, you stupid John!" said Margaret, her voice trembling with happy laughter, her cheeks wet, "you incredibly stupid John! I thought I should have to ask you myself."

"Darling! I scarcely dared to hope!" he said holding her fast, "that you should care for me."

"Care for you! I love you more than life," she said with a little sob of happiness, "in all the world there is only you."

He kissed her again, his soul upon his lips. Margaret hid her face in his coat, and, presently, a small voice spoke, muffled against his breast.

"Dear," she said, with a little trembling laugh, "you don't feel—beaten and disgraced now——?"

His laugh echoed hers.

"My pride and happiness are so great," he said, looking into her eyes, "that I cannot believe this is the same world I lived in an hour ago. My darling! What is a trifle like that to me, now?"

"Yet you would have let that trifle stand between us?"

"I felt I had no right to speak, when I had failed. Success, not excuses, was demanded in the Army."

"I am not the Army! You are beyond understanding, dear. Why did you not ask me long ago? I was yours, if you would have had me, from the day I went with you to Woolwich."

"A man does not claim reward for saving the girl he loves from evil!" exclaimed Orme; "my darling! if I thought even now that only gratitude——"

She closed his mouth with her hand.

"There is no end to the nonsense you talk, dear one," she said, "but it is your code, and I suppose it is that that makes me love you all the more."

There was an interlude.

"But, with it all," said Orme suddenly, laying his hands on her shoulders, "I will never rest while that reptile, who did harm to you, is a free man."

"He has done far greater evil to another, than to me," said Margaret, "that was nothing." She shivered. "Evil that you do not guess at, and will never know."

"He will pay the price," said Orme. He took her in his arms.

"Love is all that matters now," said Margaret softly.

CHAPTER XVI

THE STAIN ON THE CEILING

MR. MASSINGHAM, chief agent for the Crimson party, strode through Westington, in the twilight, tired, triumphant, and happy. He was also extremely thirsty. Entering the bar of a small hostelry in Oldham Gardens, he bought a dry ginger ale—the extreme dissipation that he ever allowed himself.

Having absorbed it, he at once went out, not caring to be seen for any length of time in a public bar. In the Gardens outside, a circular seat round the trunk of a big plane-tree, on which a few leaves still hung, invited him to a rest. The autumn night was mild, he had been on the move all day, and there was no hurry.

"It takes a smart lad to beat Herbert Massingham!" he chuckled. He felt the same satisfaction as a trainer who, after a close-run race, is able to carry through an objection and claim the stakes for his owner. The final result of the Westington elec-

tion was a better advertisement for Massingham than even if Craven had won outright at the beginning.

But there were several things about that inquiry that rather puzzled Massingham, and he was a man who did not like being puzzled.

"Thank goodness we beat Orme!" he said to himself, "and yet it's queer that Orme goes down for cheating though I'd swear he's as clean as myself. While Craven, who takes as much keeping straight as any candidate I ever dealt with, is the good boy. It's a funny world."

While Mr. Massingham was musing, he became aware of two men who had just emerged from the bar across the road. It was his business to know nearly everybody in Westington, and he recognised Mr. Linke as one. He also noticed, even at that distance, that Mr. Linke had certainly not been restricting himself to ginger ale. The other man was a "minder" named Outhwaite, one of the electors whose bought vote had caused the downfall of Orme.

"Linke!" murmured Massingham, watching him. "Celebrating his political success, by the look of him! Or keeping his courage up. Well, he did Orme the worst turn of any man living, the fool. There's the makings of a row yonder."

The two men were evidently not agreeing; Outhwaite's voice was raised angrily, and it looked as though there would be a fight. However, the "minder" turned away and strode off by himself. Mr. Linke came across the gardens with a slightly unsteady gait. He sat down very suddenly on the seat under the tree, not observing Massingham, and tried unsuccessfully to light the stub of his cigar. The cigar and the match somehow fought shy of each other.

"Good evening, Linke," said the agent quietly.

Mr. Linke started.

"Mr. Massingham!" he said, "'s you, is it? Well, you've won all right, eh?"

He threw away the cigar and lit a fresh one.

"Thanks to you, Linke," said Massingham with gentle irony; "you did us an extremely good turn, virtue is not your only reward."

Linke pricked up his ears. A dull gleam of greed shone in his face.

"Don't you think, mister," he said thickly, leaning towards Massingham, "that you might sphring a bit more, then?"

Massingham looked at him curiously.

"Why? You've been paid," was all he said, keeping his eyes on the man.

"Aye," said Linke, with the awful solemnity of

the intoxicated, "I had the extra hundred. But I'm thinkin' it's worth another century on top o' that—to keep my mouth shut for good. Your gov'nur can afford it."

Every nerve in Massingham's body tingled. A vague suspicion, that had for some time been in his mind but never till now took shape, suddenly became a certainty. Sir Melmoth Craven had paid this man to do what he did. Massingham's eyes glowed dangerously, and a strong disgust filled him. He controlled it and turned to Linke.

"Let me see," he said quietly, "what money is it you've had in all? I'll see what I can do for you."

But Linke suddenly shut up like a shell-fish. Muddled though he was, it began to dawn on him that he had made a blunder.

"I dunno what you mean," he muttered, rising unsteadily, "it's time I was gettin' home."

Massingham made no attempt to keep him, but sat back on the seat and frowned at the darkness.

"Great powers! Is this thing possible?" he said. For some time he sat turning the matter over in his mind. Then, rising suddenly, he walked away at a rapid pace.

Ten minutes' walk brought him to a small house in a back street where Outhwaite lived. The man

himself answered the door, and scowled when he saw Massingham.

"What's tha want!" he said curtly.

"I believe you had a five-pound note from Linke," said Massingham, "we heard it at the inquiry. I'd very much like to know if you've still got it—though it isn't likely. If so——"

"What t' blazes is that to thee!" said Outhwaite fiercely, "I'd ha' seen t' dirty money further, if I'd thought it'd ha' done Johnny Orme any harm! Yon fool Linke——"

"Just so," replied Massingham, "I'm going to look into that business. "I'll give you ten pounds for that fiver, if, by any chance, you've got it."

The man stared at him blankly.

"Done! It's thine," he said, "ten pound for five's good enow for me. As it happens, I've got t' flimsey, yet."

He went into the house, and came back with a five-pound note, for which Massingham gave him ten.

"Ask no questions, and keep your head shut," said Massingham briefly, "there's no trouble coming to you."

He left the door, and halted under the nearest street lamp, where he inspected the note, and,

taking out a small pocket book, compared some figures in it.

"The infernal scoundrel!" exclaimed Massingham savagely.

He set out on a rapid quest, and managed to find six more of the voters who had caused Orme's defeat. In only one case was he able to get another of the notes. It confirmed what the first had shown him.

Both of them had passed through Massingham's hands before. He had had many of Sir Melmoth's cheques to cash prior to the election for working expenses—one draft for five hundred he had taken to the bank himself, and given the money to his chief, who was glad to be relieved of all such trouble, Massingham's honesty being above reproach.

Not one man in thirty, perhaps, would have troubled to record the numbers of bank-notes that were only in his hands for half an hour. But Massingham was a person of unbending method, and he never took a chance. The number of every note he had handled during the election was in his pocket book. And the two notes he had recovered from the voters were in that list.

Sir Melmoth, then, had furnished the money with which they were bribed.

Massingham was almost beside himself with rage and indignation. There may possibly be election agents who would have let the affair slide. He was not one of them. Absolute straightforwardness was the key of his nature, and no word had ever been breathed against him. Moreover, he had the fierce north-country hatred of being fooled.

Massingham made a bee-line for Linke's house. That bibulous person was in bed, and his wife, an unhappy-looking little woman, dared not go up and wake him. But Massingham insisted. Linke, tousled and sullen, came down. As soon as they were alone together, he asked brutally what the matter was.

"There are two blackguards in this city, and you're the lesser of them—that's what's the matter!" said Massingham. "You did that job for Craven! You must have been mad or drunk to think that I knew of it! Don't dare to deny it!" he added fiercely, cutting Linke short, "or it will be so much worse for you. I've the proofs here in my hands! You think you're safe, do you?

"You were lucky to get nothing for the bribery. But this is different—it's a conspiracy to commit felony, my lad! You were paid by Orme's opponent to work up false evidence against him!

For you it means twelve months' hard labour, as sure as you sit there."

Linke, his nerves shattered, gasped and grew white.

"I didn't mean any harm! What d'you want of me?" he whined. "What are you here for?"

"To tell you what you'll do," said Massingham grimly. "You will write on this paper, with this pen, the following confession: 'I, Simon Linke, received from Sir Melmoth Craven the money with which I bribed Orme's voters.' Write that, and I'll see what I can for you, and get you off easier than you otherwise would. I don't promise much. It's the bigger scoundrel I want though—you were only the paid agent."

Linke stared at him, fingered the pen, and then threw it down.

"I won't do it!" he swore, "why should I?"

"As you please," said Massingham quietly, and he walked to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To the police. You will sleep in the cells to-night," said Massingham, and he walked out.

Linke ran after him and pulled him back.

"Give a chap a chance!" he gasped, "I never knew I was doin' any harm—I swear I didn't! It was all that swab Craven! I wouldn't harm Orme

for such as him. I can prove it was Craven's job, an' not mine. Mr. Massingham, will you swear you'll get me off, if I give you that bit o' paper!"

"I'll swear nothing, and promise nothing," said Massingham briefly, "but it will be in your favour if you make a confession now before the case comes into court. Or it is hard labour to a certainty. Choose which you will do."

"I tell you I never knew there was any harm in it," almost sobbed Linke. "Craven has been an' let a poor man down—that's what he's done, the dirty cur! You're hard on me, Mr. Massingham! What should I suffer on his account for?" He seized the piece of paper, thought for a moment, scribbled on it hurriedly, and handed it to Massingham. "Will this make it right for me, sir? Will it do?"

He had written: "I, Simon Linke, was given money by Sir Melmoth Craven, which he told me to pay to Orme's voters, and I did it. I did not know there was anything wrong in it, as Sir Melmoth Craven assured me it was alright, and I didn't know anything about election law. Signed, Simon Linke."

Massingham read it and smiled grimly.

"Yes, this will do," he said, and pocketing the

slip of paper he went out, striding briskly toward the central square.

"And now, Sir Melmoth," he said, quickening his pace, "you'll answer to me!"

Linke's head protruded from the doorway, and looked after the departing Massingham with savage, bloodshot eyes.

"I reckon I was a fool to write that paper," he muttered, "he'll do me down, yet." Linke swore under his breath. "I'd give the price I got from Craven to see yon beggar lying dead!"

In a burning heat of anger, Massingham made for the White Rose Hotel, Craven's headquarters, and inquired for the baronet.

He drew blank. The manager of the hotel informed him that Sir Melmoth was out, but would probably be back before eight o'clock.

"I will leave a letter for him, in case I miss him," said Massingham quietly, and, going into the hotel writing-room, he indited a message.

"SIR MELMOTH CRAVEN, BART.:

"I find that instead of acting for a man of honour, I have been the unwitting abettor of a felony. Your infamous action in suborning one of Orme's agents to nullify his election by pre-

arranged bribery, has been discovered by me to-night. I have all the proofs in my hands.

"The public righting of this wrong, and the undoing of a criminal act, must follow immediately. You, as the principal in it, will have to bear the consequences.

"I shall afford you an opportunity of making any statement you may wish to submit to me, after which I shall take official action. At eight o'clock, one hour from now, I shall be at your rooms and expect you to see me.

"Failing this, I shall acquaint John Orme with the facts forthwith, and place the evidence in the hands of the police.

"HERBERT MASSINGHAM."

Massingham sealed this carefully, and gave it to the manager.

"Please ensure that Sir Melmoth Craven gets this as soon as he returns," he said, and left the hotel.

Massingham went to his own house, shut himself in his study, and devoted forty minutes to arranging the evidence he had obtained, and to writing out a full report of the circumstances. The task gave him a bitter satisfaction. When it was finished he enclosed the documents in an envelope and placed them in an inner pocket.

"Forty-eight hours will see the end of Sir Melmoth's public career," he remarked vindictively. "This will raise all England against the scoundrel. And if it doesn't land him in the common prison that he richly deserves—then there's no justice left in the country!"

He glanced at his watch; it was a quarter to eight. Massingham caught up his hat and was about to return to the White Rose, when it occurred to him to telephone and make sure. He rang up the hotel.

"Has Sir Melmoth Craven returned?"

The answer came back briefly.

"Sir Melmoth came back soon after seven. He paid his bill and left the hotel at a quarter past, in his own motor-car. Left orders that any letters were to be forwarded to London."

Massingham stifled an exclamation.

"Do you know if he got that note I left him? I'm Massingham."

"Yes, it was handed to him with his other letters. Sir Melmoth left in a hurry—urgent business, he said."

Massingham jerked the receiver back on to its hooks and gave an ejaculation of utter disgust.

"Urgent business!" he said between his teeth; "the cur dare not face me—he has bolted! And

little wonder, for no defence is possible. So much for Craven! Now for the better man—and a thousand pities he is on the wrong side in politics."

There was, from Mr. Massingham's point of view, only one side in politics. But any man dishonourably treated could count on his sympathy, and he felt it was due that Orme should be the first to know he had lost his seat unjustly. Massingham set off for the Bell Hotel as fast as he could walk.

"I'm glad to be able to show I bear the lad no grudge," he said to himself. "I was mighty sore with him over that row we had in the square, and I made full use of it, too. But, by all the powers, he was right—I sympathise with him now. To think that hound should have made a tool of me!"

A murky fog, no rare thing at Westington, had settled on the town during the last half-hour, and a thin drizzle was falling. The lights of the Bell Hotel shone blurred and dim through the reek.

"Mr. Orme in?" said Massingham curtly to the manager, who was in the hotel office.

"Don't know," the manager replied rather grumpily; "you can go up and see if you like, Mr. Massingham. I'm short-handed. What with wages, and short hours, and these blessed elections——"

"I'll go and see. If he's not long I'll wait for him," snapped Massingham, cutting him short, and went up the main staircase.

"Looks as if he's lost a shilling and found a bad half-penny," commented the landlord to himself, glancing after the visitor; "what on earth does *he* want with Orme? Be a lively meeting, I should think. Well, deuce take these elections say I. Spoil a lot more business than they ever make."

The landlord reverted gloomily to his newspaper, which contained a poignant article on the whiskey shortage. He closed down the glass window over the office counter, and, turning his back to it, settled into an armchair with his feet on the fender.

Presently the ceiling overhead quivered lightly, and there was a faint, dull bump. The landlord did not appear to notice it. The house was old, and a passing van in the street made it shake at any time. He puffed drowsily at his pipe, absorbed in the most pessimistic column of the trade paper.

At last he threw the journal down, stretched out his legs, clasping his hands behind his head, and gazed reflectively upwards, musing upon the troubles that beset the licensed victualler. For some time he remained so, in a waking dream.

Then, though he did not move his head, a puzzled look came into the landlord's eyes. Did he, indeed, dream—or was there something wrong with the ceiling?

The look in his eyes changed to amazement, and then to a tense, dilated horror, as he gazed upwards. His jaw fell; he gripped the sides of his chair.

A dull, wet, red stain was spreading slowly across the whitewash overhead.

CHAPTER XVII

TOO LATE

THE mud through which Orme trudged on his way back from Dereham Hall was as the flowered meads of Paradise beneath his feet. His head was among the clouds, the world was his footstool. He laughed aloud as he strode along the country road. The woman he loved loved him.

He could have had a car for the asking, but the open air suited his mood better. It was not particularly fresh air. The fog hung thick over all the district north of Westington, and above the city, though southward of the town it was still clear. And between the fog and the care-free mind of a man to whom the most wonderful thing in the world has happened, Orme made the mistake of his life, and brought upon himself a tragedy unutterable.

It was a little thing in itself. It is the little things that count. He took a wrong turning in the mist, and lost his way. That cost him a delay of barely half an hour.

Orme laughed at himself when he discovered the error, finally reached the high road again, and arrived in the main square of Westington just as the town-hall clock was striking eight. Few people were abroad, only some blurred shapes moving silently through the fog. He walked in at the deserted-looking entrance of the Bell, and went straight upstairs.

The door of his sitting-room stood very slightly ajar, only a single electric light was burning. He threw off the light overcoat he wore, and seeing a small pile of letters waiting for him on his desk, made for them and opened them. Only one was of importance, and he read it through.

He had been in the room, perhaps, four minutes, and a curious uneasiness, that he could not account for, was growing upon him. Perhaps it was the dim light, so he switched on another light, and was moving towards the table in the centre of the room, when he stopped dead, changed colour, and stared.

A muddy boot, with a turned-up tweed trouser-leg showing above it, protruded a few inches from under the long cloth that draped the table. The foot rested inert upon the thin, light carpet, and beside it was a deep stain of blood.

For a moment Orme stared, petrified. Then,

darting forward, he thrust the table right away. A cry of horror broke from him.

The body of a man lay there, motionless, with upturned face and clenched hands, a knife buried in his breast.

It was Massingham.

No horror he had ever witnessed in war affected Orme as did that dreadful and unexpected sight. For a few seconds it paralysed him. Then he moved swiftly to the body's side and stooped down. He saw Massingham's eyelids quiver slightly.

The man was not dead! In an instant Orme withdrew the knife—he felt the victim stir, but at a glance, he saw that Massingham was beyond any aid that he could render.

"A doctor! The police!" gasped Orme, and, flinging the knife down, he rose and made for the door. As he did so, it opened suddenly, and the landlord, pale and apprehensive, entered.

It was as though he expected a tragedy, even before he arrived. But when the horror in that room met his eyes, he uttered a scream like a woman's, and started back.

"Out of the way, man!" cried Orme, thrusting him aside, "call a——"

The landlord suddenly grappled with him.

"You devil!" he shrieked, "oh—you devil!"

He was a powerful man, and he thrust with such hysterical strength that Orme staggered back. The landlord darted through the door and slammed it, and hung on the handle with all his might.

"Police!" he yelled, "police!"

Then he saw that the key was in the lock; in an instant he had turned it, and ran down the corridor bawling.

"Madman! Let me out!" cried Orme hoarsely, beating on the door as he heard the key turn.

The landlord was already half-way down the stairs. His outcries roused the hotel. He snatched a police-whistle from a nail over the office counter, ran to the front steps, and blew it frantically. A sergeant of the Lancashire Constabulary came running through the fog, and, in answer to the landlord's frenzied appeal, followed him up the stairs at full speed, his guide gasping a few incoherent words as he ran.

In a few seconds the door was open again. The sergeant took in the scene with one rapid glance. Orme faced him, deadly white.

"Get a doctor, in heaven's name!" he said, "the man's not dead!"

"Aye, sir," said the sergeant stolidly, "but you're hurt, too, I think."

He took hold of Orme's wrist and raised it. Hand and cuff were stained red. There was a swift double click, and Orme found his hands fettered.

"Well done!" gasped the landlord thickly, "he did it—the devil!" His voice rose hysterically. "Got him in the act!"

"Fetch the doctor, and quick about it," said the sergeant, and at the same moment a constable thrust his way into the room. "Jerrold, look after that prisoner!"

Orme let his chained hands drop before him with a hopeless gesture. Speech was useless. The sergeant had stooped over the prostrate form of Massingham, made a brief examination, and, with a faint, pitying shrug of his broad shoulders, stood up again. He looked grimly at Orme.

"Is he dead?" said Orme thickly.

"Anything you say may be used against you," was the sergeant's only reply.

"I have only this to say. I found him here—it was done when I arrived. I was in the very act of giving the alarm when Marlow came, and he locked me in. Take me by all means—I shall soon be cleared. But in heaven's name get on to the track of the man who did it! You are making a fearful mistake, and the murderer is escaping!"

"Ah," said the sergeant briefly, "do you accuse any one?"

"No! The thing is beyond me. I cannot even guess why Massingham is here at all," said Orme hoarsely. "I see that you must arrest me, but the criminal, whoever he is, has got away!"

"Take him to the station," said the sergeant to the constable, "get assistance—send for a cab."

Orme was led away.

The sergeant made a few rapid notes, and, carefully avoiding the disturbing of anything in the room, used the desk telephone to call up his superiors at headquarters. In a few minutes the doctor arrived with a black bag, and made his examination. It did not last long. In a few minutes he rose from his task.

"You say he was alive when you came in!" said the doctor to the police-sergeant.

"Yes, sir."

"It can have been nothing but a last flicker," replied the doctor.

"I feared so, sir. I think that he died while I was beside him. I hoped he would be able to make some statement—he was just conscious, and seemed to want to. But he could not."

"I should think it was impossible. And now—impossible for ever. Poor fellow!" The doctor,

despite his long experience, was badly shaken by the tragedy to which he had been called. "I knew him well. You hoped for a statement from him, sergeant? Is there, then, any mystery about the case? I was told by the man who fetched me——"

"As little mystery as ever there was in a murder case, I should say, sir," the sergeant replied grimly; "if Mr. Massingham had been able to say a word before he died, it would just have clinched the certainty, that's all. But it's not for me to talk about that. Will you please remain, sir, till my chiefs come from headquarters? They won't be a minute now."

"I suppose I must," said the doctor, but he turned away from the scene before him. "I have known Massingham for years, but I was one of Orme's supporters, and was in this room with him only yesterday. I believed in Orme. I saw them taking him away, but I only pray he may clear himself of this crime."

At that moment two men entered the room—a superintendent, and a plain-clothes officer of the C.I.D., grave, business-like, and efficient.

"Did the prisoner make any statement, Sergeant Bruce?" asked the superintendent, as he made a rapid survey of the details before him.

The sergeant read out from his notes exactly what Orme had said. The superintendent seemed to attach little importance to it. But the detective listened keenly.

"Remains to be seen if anybody else can have come into the room," he said briefly. "I want the landlord's story first." He went to interview the badly shaken Marlow, whom he found steadying his nerves with brandy. Meanwhile the superintendent searched the pockets of the dead man.

Nothing was to be found that seemed to throw light on the case. Not even a note-book was found on Massingham's person. There was a case, containing twenty-five pounds in one-pound notes, and two Bank of England notes of ten pounds each. Nothing else save small change and some printed election documents.

The detective returned.

"A clear enough case against the prisoner by the look of it," he said. "I understand, doctor, that you were acquainted with the dead man?"

"I knew him well. But," said the doctor, "I can tell you nothing about this dreadful business prior to the moment when I was called in."

"You can answer me a question which is important though, I hope, sir. It may help us.

Mr. Orme was not on good terms with the victim of this crime, it seems. Can you think of any one else who was an enemy of Massingham—who might have wished him harm?"

The doctor hesitated.

"I can think of no one at all," he answered, "who could have the motive for such a deed as this. But there may be such. I should prefer to answer such questions in court."

"I am trying to discover, sir, whether there is any clue which would lead us to suppose we have got the wrong man. But we will confine ourselves to the present issue. Could the wound have been self-inflicted?"

"No, it is hardly possible."

The detective picked up the knife.

"The murder was committed with this, doctor?"

"Undoubtedly it is the weapon that caused the wound," said the doctor, almost impatiently.

"A queer-looking thing," said the superintendent, glancing at it.

"It is a trench dagger," said the detective, "such as was used on the Western front in '16. Has anybody touched it, Wilson, since the discovery?"

"Nothing in the room has been touched at all. I've seen to that," said the superintendent.

"Then," said the detective quietly, "there is a mark here that should be of the first importance."

He turned the dagger over. On the upper inch of the blade, that was free from stain on one side, a clearly imprinted thumb-mark was visible on the bright steel, close against the hilt.

. . . . . .

A little before noon on the following day Orme was restlessly pacing the floor of the remand cell at Westington police station. It was not an uncomfortable apartment, as cells go, but, judging by Orme's grim, white face, it might have been a torture-chamber.

"Have I been too sure?" he muttered. "I am innocent as the unborn, and last night seemed to me that today I should surely walk out a free man. But every hour the doubt grows! Fate has woven a strange web around me!"

He tramped the cell, his brain on fire. What, he asked himself for the hundredth time, was the answer to that blood-stained riddle that had been thrust suddenly into his life?

Who had murdered Massingham? Where was the man, and what deadly motive could he have had to commit a crime so ghastly? Why should some human devil have come silently out of the night to take a fellow-creature's life, and have

slipped away, leaving no trace? And, by a terrible irony, Orme, Massingham's only known enemy, was there to shoulder another's load of guilt.

One thought above all others gripped his heart, and filled him with grief and pity.

"Margaret!" he murmured, "my darling! What is my trouble, to hers? What should I be feeling in her place! If things go wrong, what torment for her. If I could only see and comfort her!"

He threw himself on the bench, and his thoughts were bitter. Not for one moment did his courage fail—nor would it have failed had the hangman's noose been around his throat. Fate had indeed played him an ugly trick, and he knew that before now innocent men had gone to the scaffold. But that seemed far off, and faith in the Right was Orme's chief strength.

The cell key grated in the lock, and the turnkey brought in a visitor. It was the solicitor, Harold Poynter, a smart, keen young lawyer, who had acted for Orme during the election. They had already had an interview early that morning; Orme had sent for him at once.

The lawyer looked grave and anxious.

"I've gone through the case as it stands, Orme," he said, as he shook hands; "you know, of course,

that you are bound to be committed for trial, and the only thing we can do before the magistrate is to reserve your defence for the Assizes."

"Look here, Poynter," said Orme, "I've got all I can stand. Tell me clearly, can I possibly be convicted for the crime which I never committed!"

"I'll give it you straight," said Poynter, "there's a strong chance of it, unless we can find entirely fresh evidence. The case could not be blacker. But I'll work to my limit for you, Orme—because I believe you innocent."

"If you did not," said Orme, "I would ask you to walk out of this cell."

"Exactly. There are lawyers, no doubt, who would defend you, believing you guilty. It's their job. I'm not one of them. But I believe I'm the only man in Westington that does believe you innocent, unless it's your partner, Ingram. Now, I'll tell you shortly how you stand. You're not a man that wants me to gloss things over for you.

"Massingham is found murdered; you are found beside the body, with the life still in it. The weapon that killed him belongs to you, as you admit—the trench dagger that you use as a paper-cutter, and that was always on your desk.

"Massingham was the man who got you thrown

out of your seat in Parliament. You were on bad terms with him before that. You had a row with him publicly, early in the election.

"Massingham asked for you at the hotel, and went up to your rooms. Nobody knows you were not there when he arrived; nobody saw you when you came in. There's no evidence to that but your own word. But you were discovered with the murdered man. You did not kill Massingham. It was done by somebody else. Very well.

"Unless we can find a man who hated Massingham badly enough to kill him, and who slipped in, committed that crime, and got away, leaving you to find the body—unless we name and find that man—your chance of escaping conviction, Orme, is not worth the toss of the coin.

"I'm bound to put it before you as a lawyer sees it. And now, enough of croaking—I'll come to one little thing that's in your favour, and may save you.

"On the one bit of unsoiled steel on that dagger is a thumb-mark. It is not yours, and it is not Massingham's."

"Ah!" said Orme, "the police took impressions of my thumbs early this morning. I remember——"

"Precisely. And the print on the knife is not yours. That may lead to something. Don't

build too much on it though. It may be anybody's—it may be days old. A servant—or any of your numerous visitors at the hotel—may have fingered the thing. If we found the man whose thumb-print that is, it would be no proof that he had any hand in the crime. Yet we shall follow that up to the utmost. And now, Orme, think well. Can you give me any reason why Massingham should come to your rooms? That to me, is the strangest thing of all."

"None in the world. Except that I always thought he believed me guiltless of tampering with those voters myself, and, perhaps, he came to say so—to end any personal quarrel between us," said Orme wearily. "That's all I can think of. He was a straight little chap. I don't see how it helps, though. The whole thing's like a nightmare, and it's simply beyond me."

"You can think of nothing better?"

"No. And now I'm going to ask you a question, Poynter." Orme rose from his seat. "Where was Sir Melmoth Craven when all this happened?"

"I've been into that. The police have accounted for the movements of everybody who is connected with you and Massingham. Sir Melmoth left Westington in his car a full three quarters of an hour before the thing happened,

motored to Liverpool direct, slept there last night, and left for London this morning. Massingham rang up Craven at the Rose, was told he had packed up and gone, and, immediately afterwards, came to your hotel. At that time Craven was thirty miles away."

Orme was silent.

"Quite sure of that?" he asked at last.

"Quite. What is in your mind?"

"This," replied Orme, "whenever I have met with foul play in each case Craven's figure has appeared in the background."

"You and he are rivals, and bitter ones," said Poynter. "I don't like the man. But do you seriously suggest that—apart from its being apparently proved he was not even in Westington—that Craven would have murdered Massingham? For what reason? Massingham, his friend and ally, the man who won the seat for his chief, and caused your defeat and humiliation? It would be a strange reward. If Craven had murdered you, it could be understood. And we would have caught and hanged him."

"Your logic beats me," said Orme grimly, "as Craven, so far, has beaten me. But—follow it up."

"Be sure we shall. Only let us beware how we waste time in following blind alleys. There are

things that promise better fruit. You are not the only man in custody. They have arrested Simon Linke, the man who bribed your voters."

"Linke!" exclaimed Orme. "They've got him, have they!"

"On the suspicion that he may have been concerned in the crime with you. They'll try and connect him with it."

"Massingham discovered that bribery of his. And I sacked him," said Orme thoughtfully; "he had some grudge, then, against Massingham. Linke is a crooked little animal. But I should say there's more of the sneak-thief than the murderer about him. Any clues?"

"So far they find little against him. I've seen him, and a more terrified and guilty-looking creature I never set eyes on than Linke is now. But there's nothing to show he ever went to your rooms, and the thumb-print on the dagger is not his. For the rest, we shall see. Another queer thing has come to light. Massingham went yesterday to several of those voters Linke bribed, and bought from them—at an increase—the notes which Linke gave them. That's going to be well threshed out, Orme! Why did he do it? What notes were they? They weren't found on Massingham's body!"

"Ah!" said Orme, his eyes brightening, "this helps me. It should put them on the track!"

"It's the best thing yet. And now I must get back to work—I can do no good here." He put his hands on Orme's shoulders. "We'll pull you through, lad! But it will be a heavy fight, and mind this—there is one man in England who, I believe, would save you to a certainty—if we can only get him."

"Who's that?"

"Vernon Haggard, K.C. The great Criminal Court's barrister. The keenest legal brain in England. He's simply made for a case like this, it's exactly his mark. If he defends you, he'll pull if off!"

"Haggard!" said Orme, and his brow contracted slightly. "I know him—and like him little enough. He likes me as little. And yet—he is all that you say. I realise that my neck is in danger, and if he can clear me, and will—be it so. I leave that to you."

"And I'll set about it at once," said Poynter gripping his hand. "Good-bye, lad, and keep your heart up."

When Poynter had gone, Orme reviewed rapidly in his mind the news he had heard. He saw very quickly that, though Massingham's quest of the

bank-notes used for bribery looked helpful at first glance, it was a two-edged knife, and cut both ways. The mystery was deeper than he had dreamed of. While he was thinking it over an inspector came to the cell.

"A visitor has come for you," said the inspector; "there's no objection, if you wish it, but you must be taken to the prisoners' receiving-room. Only your solicitor can see you in your cell."

"Who is it?" exclaimed Orme.

"Miss Margaret Garth is the name," said the inspector with a wooden face.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE K. C.'S OFFER

For one moment the black shadow seemed to lift itself from Orme. The knowledge that Margaret's love and loyalty had brought her straightway to his side in that dark hour filled him with a joy beyond speech. Here was such a woman as men dreamed of. She would stand by him, even at the gallows' foot.

Even the dreary room to which he was taken, the iron grille that shut him off from Margaret, and the silent turnkey who remained in the room throughout—even these could not dim the happiness that the girl's sweet presence brought to Orme's heart.

She came in, erect but very pale. The trouble in her eyes was pitiful. The iron bars separated them—even their hands could not touch. Such precautions are inflexible in the case of a prisoner awaiting trial for murder.

"Margaret!" he said softly, "this means more

to me than all the help that men can give. Dear, how can I thank you! But—they should not have let you come."

"Do you think I could stay away?" she said; "my place is as near you as they will let me be. Tell me," she said eagerly, "they will let you go soon? This is some fearful blunder that will quickly be cleared up at the trial!"

Orme looked her in the eyes, and smiled.

"It is absolutely certain," he said, "that I shall walk out after that trial a free man. And then, Margaret, if you do not despise a lover who has been tried for his life on an absurd charge—I shall claim you."

Margaret's bosom was heaving. She gazed at him some time before she spoke.

"You say that to comfort me," she said gently, her eyes wet; "dear, I am not a child. That you can be condemned, I utterly refuse to believe. But—I know that there is danger. It must be faced. I have seen your lawyer, and he has told me."

Orme inwardly cursed Poynter.

"He meant there is danger in all trials, even to the innocent," said Orme; "that is all. If my case is ably handled, Margaret, I shall most certainly be acquitted."

"Yes!" she said eagerly, "and every help that can be given, shall be yours! I said so to your solicitor. We have talked of this. There is one man above all others who shall fight on your side. It is Haggard, the great K. C."

There was a moment's pause.

"Yes," said Orme quietly, "I know that he is the man I need."

"And I will see to it that he acts for you!" exclaimed Margaret, "here is something that I can do! I—we know Mr. Haggard very well—he used to come to the house often. It shall be settled at once."

"Margaret," said Orme with sudden passion, "remember one thing. I will face the worst penalty there is, rather than agree that you, the woman I love, should beg a favour of any man that walks this earth!"

"You shall run no risk that I can spare you," replied Margaret softly, but with absolute decision. "But, as for Mr. Haggard, my mother will make sure of that."

"If she will act for me—now," said Orme.

Margaret lifted her eyes to his in quiet amazement.

"If!" she murmured, "do you doubt it?"

"No," he said with deep emotion. "It is far

more than I've a right to hope, but I do not doubt it." A glow of pride and happiness lit his eyes. Though hundreds had already condemned him in their hearts, though the shadow of the rope was over him, the bare thought that he could be guilty had never entered the mind of Margaret. Nor did the idea that Mrs. Garth—wealthy, powerful, masterful—would turn against the man who loved her daughter, and was to be tried for his life. And Orme knew that Margaret was right. Love was his ally, and by Love's side, strong and well armed, stood Power.

The inspector entered. The interview was at an end.

"Have faith, Margaret," said Orme quietly; his eyes sought hers with appeal and an unutterable longing. "The shadow lifts—there is happiness for us yet."

Margaret tried to smile an answer, but, leaving the room, she stifled a little sob. The parting under the eyes of the watchers was too bitter.

A car, that was waiting, took her swiftly back to Dereham Hall. In the refuge of her own room, Margaret at last broke down, and, with her head on her arms, cried piteously. She was found and comforted by old Lady Dereham.

"Margaret," she said, embracing the girl gently,

"I believe in John Orme, and I believe that he will go free—because you love him."

Margaret stood up.

"You are so good and kind to me," she said, passing her hand across her eyes. "But I must go. There are things I have to do without any delay. There's a train to London in an hour. Can I have a car?"

Lady Dereham nodded.

"I shall go with you," she said, "this is no time for you to travel alone. There is a telegram from your mother—I will send one to her. We will start at once."

At seven o'clock that evening, Margaret arrived at the house in Berkeley Terrace. Mrs. Garth, who had been on the point of starting for Westington when the telegram came, was waiting for her. The moment they were alone, Mrs. Garth's arms wound about her daughter, and held her close.

"My darling!" she said, "have you not suffered enough, that this grief should fall upon you now! Can you bear it, Margaret?"

The girl clung to her, unable to find words. Then, suddenly, she looked into Mrs. Garth's face.

"Mother," she said in a voice that shook, "you believe?"

"In John Orme!" said the elder woman steadily, "yes, with a faith that no judge could shake! Do not fear, Margaret—the case is a terrible one, but we shall clear him. This morning when your letter came, I was the happiest woman in England, knowing that you and Orme were to be man and wife. And then, in the same hour, I learn of this blow that falls on him."

A bitter sigh escaped her.

"Every help that I can give is his from this moment. The more so," she added sadly, "since, until now, I have failed him."

"Failed him!" said Margaret, "how?"

"I led him to believe that, even if Craven triumphed, I could bring him to book—in the hour of his success. I have not done it," said Mrs. Garth dully, "I may never do it. Though I know him to be as guilty as Ducros, in that last affair, the proofs still escape me."

"If you had them," said Margaret, "would that help us now?"

"No. The wrong that Craven did you—his infamy to me in the past—these are only side issues now, for we have Orme's safety to think of. That is our first concern. I do not see, as things are, how Craven has a hand in that. But every instinct that I have leads me that way! We may

throw a strong light on that when I get to work. Tell me what you know."

Margaret related what had happened, and told of her visit to Orme. Mrs. Garth listened intently.

"Vernon Haggard!" she exclaimed.

"He is the man, of all others!" exclaimed Margaret eagerly.

"It is true," said Mrs. Garth. But her brows knitted in a frown. "I could wish it were not so. I have had reasons of my own, some time since, for dropping acquaintance with Mr. Haggard—he has not been encouraged to come here. None the less he is a genius—he is worth any ten men at the Bar in such a case as this."

"Yes—John's life may depend on our securing him! Mr. Poynter told me as much," cried Margaret. "Mother, you will make sure that we have him on our side!"

"Have no fear of that. I will see to it," said Mrs. Garth; "and now I must leave you—I have a message to send. Wait for me below, Margaret I will come to you very soon."

Margaret went down to the small drawing-room on the first floor. She had been there only a few minutes when the door opened, and the butler entered.

"Mr. Vernon Haggard has called, Miss Margaret," he said.

Margaret repressed a little, eager exclamation.

"Mr. Haggard!" she said; "to see my mother, surely!"

"He asked for you, Miss Margaret. Shall I say you are in?"

"Yes, show him in at once, please!" she said.

Margaret had not seen Haggard since the fateful night of the ball—the night of Craven's visit to the house. In times past he had been a constant visitor and she had seen a good deal of him. Men with brains generally attracted Margaret, and though there were traits in him she instinctively disliked, his personality and his brilliant conversational powers always interested her.

Haggard entered—Haggard of the broad, intellectual forehead, the keen eyes, and the loose, sensual mouth. He was big, clean-shaven, and commanding; a noted figure wherever he went.

"I am glad to see you!" said Margaret impulsively, as she gave him her hand, and her eyes were sparkling. "My mother will be here directly. It is long since we have seen you."

Haggard seemed surprised, and still more gratified, at the warmth of her greeting. He took her

fingers in his large, white hand, and held them longer than was necessary.

"How charming of you to say so," he said gently; "do you know, I have feared I was less welcome here than formerly. I am happy to find it is not so."

"You have heard from my mother already then?" she said, wondering how his arrival could be so prompt.

"From Mrs. Garth?" he said. "No, I have not heard from her. I came," he added softly, "because I could stay away no longer."

Margaret immediately concluded that he had heard of the Orme case, and meant that he had come to offer his services. She did not notice the bold look of admiration, tinged with anxiety, in his eyes.

"I cannot tell you how glad I am that you have come!" she said, motioning him to a chair and sitting near him; "there is no need, then, to tell you!"

He looked at her curiously. His broad, powerful face was faintly flushed.

"To tell me?" he said; "there is only one thing in this world you could tell me, Margaret, that I wish to hear. And, since we have but a few moments together, I shall ask you now."

Margaret looked up at him, startled and amazed.

"Your answer means all the world to me!" he said. His voice shook, and he rose, placing a hand on the arm of her chair. "Margaret, I love you! I have loved you since the first day I saw you. Will you be my wife?"

Margaret rose to her feet. She strove to speak, but no words would come. It was as though she had been struck in the face.

The daughter of the richest woman in London, she was far from being unused to proposals of marriage from men of every rank and grade. That Haggard had, from time to time, paid her court, she was dimly aware, but had scarcely given a thought to it, and now less than ever. And that such an offer should come from him, at this moment of all others, was nothing less than a cruel shock. Plainly, he did not know anything of the state of her affairs.

"I never dreamed of this," she said in stifled tones, her voice quivering; "it is impossible. I regret that you should have asked me."

The eagerness in Haggard's eyes gave place to disappointment and anger. But he concealed it deftly, and drew back.

"I am unfortunate," he said slowly; "I have been too precipitate, I think. Is there no hope for me? Miss Margaret, is your answer final?"

"Absolutely final," she replied. She turned her

head away, her lip trembling. But Haggard came a step nearer.

"I suppose I have no right to ask it," he said, "but—there is someone else? Some luckier man, who has won what I hoped for?"

Margaret turned to face him.

"I am going to marry Mr. Orme," she said. There was pride, almost defiance, in her voice.

Haggard looked absolutely astounded. Her adventure at Woolwich was well known to him, but of her part in the election in the North, he knew nothing.

"Orme!" he exclaimed, "John Orme? The man who is awaiting trial at Westington?"

"He is unjustly accused!" said Margaret, with flashing eyes. Then she looked at Haggard pitifully, trying to keep back the tears that all her self-control could hardly repress. "Mr. Haggard, can you not forget what has just passed? I can only say that I am sorry. You can see how terrible this thing is to me."

Haggard's eyes were hard and cold. There was a light almost of triumph in them, as though the girl's grief were gratifying to him.

"Tell me!" she broke out, "you, who know so much of the Law. Tell me—you think Mr. Orme will be acquitted? He is innocent!"

The K. C's large, loose lips twitched gently; the question seemed to please him.

"I only know what I have seen in the papers," he replied, "my dear lady, it would be cruelty for me to tell you what I think of Orme's chance." The words were suave, but in his small eyes was a brutal, exulting look that was only half veiled. "I will merely say this. For my reputation's sake, I'm glad that I am not going to defend him."

Margaret was dumb. The disappointment struck at her heart. She began to loathe Haggard, though she knew too well what a supreme weapon his ability would have been, used on the side of her lover.

"I had hoped," she said, in a voice scarcely audible, "that you came here because you were going to do that very thing."

"This is curious," he said, smiling slightly, "for this very morning I had a telegram from a lawyer called Poynter, asking me to lead in Orme's defence." He paused. "I refused."

It was untrue. As yet he had not even answered Poynter's wire.

Margaret made a little hopeless gesture with her hands. She could not reply.

"Do *you* wish me to defend him?" said Haggard in a lower voice, moving suddenly to her side.

Margaret stared at him, and turned deadly pale. She tried to find her voice. What answer she would have made will never be known for at that moment Mrs. Garth came into the room.

Margaret seized the opportunity to escape. She felt she would break down if she remained any longer.

Mrs. Garth gave one glance at Margaret as the girl passed, and she advanced to meet Haggard, thoroughly on her guard.

"It is strange to find you here, Mr. Haggard," she said, and she did not offer him her hand, "for I was on the point of starting to see you at your chambers."

Mr. Haggard bowed.

"From what your daughter has told me," he answered, "I can gather, Mrs. Garth, what your errand would have been. Already I have been asked from Westington to act in John Orme's case. And I declined—with thanks."

"You declined?" said Mrs. Garth slowly. "You know your business best."

"One thing I did not know," replied Haggard, "is that your daughter is engaged to marry this man. A terrible thing for her, Mrs. Garth," he said quietly, "and for you. Had I known it, I should not have asked Margaret the question that

—in my ignorance—I put to her." He paused. "I asked her to be my wife."

Mrs. Garth's lips tightened. She stared at him.

"You!" she said. "*You* asked her that?"

"Yes. It was the question on which my life's happiness depended. I have long dared to hope there was a chance for me. And since my opportunities are fewer for some reason, than they used to be, I seized this one. Well, I have had my answer. It has been a bitter blow to me." He paused. "She loves this man Orme. So be it. Doubtless, one of my colleagues at the Bar can easily save him from the fate that appears to threaten."

He glanced keenly at Mrs. Garth. She did not reply. Haggard came nearer to her.

"Suppose," he said in a lower voice, "suppose, I say, that my decision were altered? What if I agreed to defend Orme!"

In a flash, Mrs. Garth saw what he meant. He would bargain with her, buying her power and authority with her daughter—at a price. His skill, his wonderful reputation at the Bar, were on offer. The stake was John Orme's life, over which the shadow of the gallows hung. The reward—Margaret.

That was his offer. This brilliant barrister,

this roué—this fortune-hunting spendthrift! For Mrs. Garth knew more of Haggard than he dreamed she could know.

Her eyes became like adamant; the pupils gleamed like two fine points of steel.

"You have refused," she said icily, "it is enough."

Haggard shrugged his shoulders. He saw that she would not treat with him.

"Yes, I have refused," he replied briefly, and turned to go.

"I wish to hear your reasons though," she said, "in your own words."

"If you like," he answered carelessly. "It is because I cannot afford it. My practice is in the Criminal Courts, but, high though my name stands, we in that branch do not earn the huge fees made by our brothers in civil cases, and in Equity."

"You mean," she said scornfully, "that Orme cannot pay you enough. But if a great fee is forthcoming, you would take up this case. Then——"

"No," he interrupted, "I don't mean that, keen though I am, as you rightly say, about money. But if you, for instance, were to pay me a very large fee, it would prejudice this case from

the outset, as you know. For it is a very peculiar case. And if you paid me secretly, I should be too much in your power. We of the Bar have our code, little as you seem to think it. Besides, I make a very good income.

"There is another reason," he added; "I am not a success in civil pleadings. If I were, I would not accept a judgeship. But one has been offered me, and as it is worth as much as I am making in the Criminal Courts—observe my frankness—I am about to accept it. My career at the Bar ends.'

"You!" she exclaimed, "a judgeship!"

"That honour has been done me," he said, with an ironical bow.

For once Mrs. Garth was wholly taken back. She was the first to hear this news, and it was a shock to her. Haggard raised to a seat on the Bench! Far from defending John Orme, that unhappy man might prove to be the first whom Mr. Justice Haggard would try for his life!

"You see, the position will be rather different to what you supposed," he said, reading her thoughts. And he spoke with a bitter and cool sneer. He rested his white knuckles on the table and looked steadily at her. "Have you now any proposal to make to me?"

She met his gaze with an expression in her eyes

that, despite himself, made Haggard quail and look uneasy.

"No!" she answered. Her fingers pressed the bell, and the butler appeared.

"Show Mr. Haggard out."

The great barrister bowed and went. Mrs. Garth remained for a little while motionless. Her face was cold as a marble statue's, her lips compressed to a thin line. Presently she made her way upstairs, and found Margaret stretched upon a couch, silent, too broken and unhappy even for tears. She glanced at her mother's face, and gave a little dry sob of despair.

"You know what has happened, mother?" she said dully. "There is no hope, then."

Mrs. Garth sat beside her, and passed a strong white arm round her daughter, kissing her on the forehead.

"Courage, Margaret," she said. "Haggard shall lead the defence for John Orme. And he shall defend him—as though he were defending his own life!"

CHAPTER XIX

MR. HAGGARD ACCEPTS A BRIEF

WHEN Vernon Haggard was not engaged on a morning case at the New Bailey, it was his custom to rise late. For, apart from his great forensic ability, he was extremely lazy.

So it was on the day following his visit to Mrs. Garth's house. At half-past ten he awoke, blinked, yawned, and pressed the bell at his bedside. A silent valet immediately brought him a cup of tea, served in delicate Sévrès china, and the morning papers.

"Will you have the letters, sir?" asked the servant. On off days Mr. Haggard did not usually care to be troubled with them until he rose.

"You can bring them in, Saunders," said the K.C. indifferently; "no hurry, there will be nothing urgent. Get out my gun-cases, and pack my kit in the dressing-room. I am going to Conninghall on a five days' visit, and you will accompany me."

Mr. Haggard sipped his tea with gentle relish. He looked extremely comfortable. The room was as luxurious as any bedroom in London. The coverlet was of fine silk, there were some exquisite pieces of antique furniture, and rare engravings decked the walls. The wealthiest bachelor in London had not better quarters. He lit a fragrant cigarette, and opened the morning papers.

Haggard turned first to the Orme case, which was allotted black headlines in a prominent column. With keen interest and pleasure, he read the report of the magisterial inquiry at Westtington, with such police evidence as had been brought forward, and the guarded Press comments. Orme had been remanded. As Mr. Haggard read, his eyes glistened, and his loose lips twisted into a laugh.

"I shall enjoy few things so much as the report of Orme's hanging," he said. "Innocent! Men found in his situation always are. The next best thing to being caught in the act. Innocent or guilty, they have got you tight, Mr. John Orme. I always had a peculiar distaste for you, and it has grown into quite a hobby—since yesterday."

He laid the paper down, and surrounded himself with a haze of blue smoke.

"And my dear Margaret, of the violet eyes—

and the Garth gold-vaults. You thought that I would defend him!" Haggard laughed silently with intense enjoyment, his large gross body shaking gently. "That I would pull your charming young friend out of the meshes. I should imagine it would be a task beyond even me. And that's saying a good deal."

He turned to his letters, which Saunders had laid on the bed. They were all in long envelopes, and most of them were obviously bills. Haggard tossed them aside carelessly. They had not much interest for him.

The chief trait of Mr. Haggard's private life was a limitless extravagance. It is a stumbling-block that has hampered many a successful man in his profession. A great barrister has the entrée to most circles. Socially, it pleased Haggard to move among the super-wealthy. He had hardly a single taste that was not costly. Cards, racing, yachting, provided these were carried on among the elect, attracted him. He had a few steeple-chasers in training, and always hoped they would be profitable. They were not. It was a poor year in which Mr. Haggard's expenses did not exceed his income by sixty or seventy per cent.

His difficulties sat lightly on him, and he concealed them skilfully from the world. His re-

venues were large enough to pay heavy interest on his loans; naturally the loans themselves did not decrease. Not one man in the legal world guessed how very thin was the ice upon which Mr. Vernon Haggard, K.C., was skating.

He was able, by skilful management, to carry on. But difficulties were increasing to such an extent that marriage with such an heiress as Margaret Garth was the only safe exit that he had hoped for.

So Haggard, to whom bills were a daily boredom, did not trouble to open the envelopes before him, with one exception. This one was a pale yellow tint, and the paper he took out of it had a clearly marked heading.

"Gordon's, Limited."

Haggard read the typed letter, with the small neat signature at the bottom. And his face turned a dusky, pulpy white.

"The woman's mad!" he gasped.

All his confidence and listlessness were gone. He looked like a man who has heard his death-warrant read. He went through the letter again, and his fingers trembled as he held it. He dropped it, and rang the bell.

"Get my clothes, and have a taxi at the door in eight minutes!" he said sharply to his valet, scrambling out of bed as he spoke.

Haggard dressed himself hastily; his face was drawn and anxious, his eyes shone with an angry light.

"This must be stopped at any cost," he muttered drawing on his boots; "it is folly! She can't mean it. Now, of all times!"

A taxi carried Haggard to the city, and in half an hour he was in the lower office at Gordon's. He wore a heavy tweed overcoat with the collar well turned up, and a soft hat.

"I must see Mrs. Gordon at once," he said authoritatively to the manager, "I cannot wait!"

"I will see if the principal will receive you," replied Mr. Drave, with as much off-handedness as if the visitor were a tradesman who had given a bill of sale on his furniture. Mr. Haggard was kept waiting nearly twenty minutes. Finally he was conducted into the red room upstairs, and found himself facing Madame Vampire.

The same sinister figure, veiled and sombre, sat behind the long desk. Somehow Haggard, who had never flinched before an angry judge or lost confidence when a plea was going wrong in court, felt even his iron nerve weaken as he looked at her. As the door closed and they were left alone she finished signing a paper and raised her eyes to him.

"Well?" she said.

"I wish to know what this means!" said Haggard, bringing out the letter and holding it before her.

"Surely it is clear?" said Mrs. Gordon. "You are in my debt for nearly twenty-two thousand pounds, as you are aware. You know, too, that some time ago I bought up your other liabilities, and I am your sole creditor. Very well. I am calling in the whole sum at once. I am realising."

"You cannot do it at such short notice!" he exclaimed.

"Pardon me," said Madame Vampire blandly, "as one of the highest legal authorities in England, Mr. Haggard, you know perfectly well that I can do it. It is provided for in the deeds. You took the risk, because you had to take it. You thought it was no risk. The cleverest people do these things, you see, when they are hard pressed."

"But what is it for?" said Haggard sharply. "It is madness! I can pay the interest! Though you have bled me like a leech, I have always paid, and I can continue. But if you push me to the wall and call the money in—why, you will not realise a tithe of it, and the payment of interest ceases! You will lose heavily!"

The thin lips behind the veil smiled slightly.

"I seldom lose by my transactions," said the

woman, "but, if I do, that is my affair, not yours. We are wasting words; it will be done as sure as you stand there before me."

"What is it you want!" said Haggard almost fiercely. "Are you trying to drive me into paying you more by this threat? I might even do that, I might pay for a respite. For the affair would be inconvenient to me—at present."

Madame Vampire's little harsh laugh answered him.

"It would be more than inconvenient," she said grimly, leaning slightly forward and looking at him; "it would mean your bankruptcy, Mr. Haggard. And for a man in your position a somewhat disgraceful bankruptcy. There are peculiar points about it. And it would be years before you got your discharge."

"We may as well name it," he muttered. "It would be my ruin!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Gordon, "your ruin. Your practice at the Bar—it would be a pricked bladder. You would go down the scale. I see, too, by the paper, that you have been offered a judgeship. The height of your ambition, perhaps—unless it is the Woolsack. Well," she added gratingly, "when the crash comes—that appointment will be cancelled. You know it."

Haggard breathed hard.

"I have always known you were a blood-sucker," he said bitterly, "but I thought you were a business woman. Instead, you are talking like a vindictive fiend."

"Let us avoid melodramatic phrases," said Mrs. Gordon drily, "you are not at present addressing a jury, Mr. Haggard. Neither am I vindictive. But you came here for your answer, and you have got it."

Haggard was deadly white. He turned slowly away.

"There is an alternative," said Madame Vampire quietly. Haggard stopped short. She tapped a pile of papers that lay beside her.

"You see these? They are the deeds that bind you, and the security for your debts to me. I should be prepared to destroy these, and to give you a full quittance of everything you owe me—under certain conditions."

Haggard's face changed. He looked at her and came forward to the desk.

"Name your condition!" he said.

"There is a well-known man in the hands of the police, awaiting trial on a murder charge," said Madame Vampire gently; "his name is Orme. My condition is that you undertake his defence."

Haggard started. He stared at Madame Vampire in amazement, and his eyes seemed to search the veiled face wonderingly.

"What on earth is John Orme to you!" he said slowly.

"He may be very little to me — or otherwise," said the woman. "I am not a sentimentalist. But it suits me that John Orme should not be sentenced for murder. Are you answered?"

Haggard seemed dazed.

"Does Orme owe you money, then?" he said.

"You forget you are not cross-examining a witness," said Madame Vampire. "I rarely satisfy the curiosity of my clients, Mr. Haggard. Well, your answer?"

For once Haggard lost his composure.

"Are you serious?" he gasped. "If I agree to defend Orme, the entire debt is wiped out, and I am free from you?"

"Yes," said Madame Vampire. "But there is something else." She tapped the desk with her fingers. "You have not only to defend Orme—you have to succeed, and secure his acquittal! For if, in spite of your defence, he is found guilty by the jury—then the whole of your debts proceed to execution immediately, and the downfall of Mr.

Vernon Haggard will be the next sensation to entertain the British Public."

Haggard drew a long breath.

"How do I know that you will do what you promise?" he muttered.

"Have I ever yet failed," she answered with a touch of scorn, "to fulfil an undertaking I have made with a client? They generally complain that I perform too much. But I have not the least objection to giving it to you in writing—in this form."

She scribbled half a dozen words on a piece of paper, and tossed it to him. Haggard's fingers closed on it. There was a moment's pause.

"I accept your terms," he said. "I will defend Orme. If my utmost powers can save him, it shall be done."

"Get to it at once then," said Madame Vampire. "Concentrate everything upon it. Help will be given you. It is possible," she added, "that fresh evidence may be found to aid you."

Haggard shrugged his shoulders, and turned to go.

"I warn you," he said, "that by what I see of the case so far, it will be extremely difficult—a forlorn hope. I intend to win. But I may fail."

"If you fail," she replied inexorably, "the result will be your disgrace and ruin."

Haggard left the building, and ten minutes later was speeding homewards in a taxi-cab.

"Ruin!" he repeated to himself grimly. "Yes—such ruin as I will not live to face. I defend my own life in defending Orme's! Well—forward to it! It shall be a tough fight!"

CHAPTER XX

REX *v.* ORME

" . . . . that you, John Orme, did on the first day of November, in the year of our Lord One Thousand Nine Hundred and Nineteen, wilfully and wickedly kill and slay by a knife wound, Herbert Travers Massingham."

The thin, clear legal voice rang sharply through the court-room, and, at the end of the charge, the question was put.

John Orme's voice replied from the dock, quietly and steadily.

"Not guilty."

The court-room at Westington Assizes was crammed as it never had been before. The serene and sphinx-like face of Mr. Justice Everedge looked as though it were carved in marble. At the barrister's table sat Vernon Haggard, K.C., silent, calm, and apparently confident. Mrs. Garth, lightly veiled, sat motionless in the front of the balcony.

Sir Gerald Graeme, the prosecuting counsel, rose to make the opening speech for the Crown. Pale blue eyes shone from under his shaggy eyebrows, and his tone was harsh and incisive.

"Gentlemen," he said, addressing the stolid but attentive faces of the jury, "the case before you is one that offers few complications, and it will be for you to say, when you have heard the evidence, whether the prisoner did or did not commit the crime of which he is accused.

"It is rare that a murder is actually witnessed. It was not witnessed in this case. It is rare that a man is actually found, with the evidences of guilt about him, at the side of the dying victim. This actually occurred in the present case. The question, and the most vital, that next arises, is that of motive. I shall lay before you proofs that the motive was clear and undeniable.

"A word as to the prisoner himself. John Orme is a man with a good, indeed a fine, war record. In the past he behaved gallantly. Nor need I leave it to the defence alone to state that recently, in a certain rescue case, he saved a well-known lady from serious harm, in circumstances that demanded skill and courage.

"But, gentlemen," said Sir Gerald, lifting his hand, "no man, who knows human nature as it is,

dare argue that because a man has performed a brave action, he is therefore incapable of a bad one. Under our laws, there is but one degree of murder. I shall not try to show you that this fatal deed was due to premeditated scheming or the building of a cunning and criminal plot. It was due rather to the sudden fierce passion of a man confronted by one whom he considered to be his enemy, and who had harmed him. It was none the less brutal for that, and it was none the less murder."

The Crown Counsel thereupon deftly sketched the events of Orme's life which led up to the election, his rivalry with Craven and his quarrel with Massingham, followed by the actual election and the charge of bribery which led to the unseating of Orme.

"We have the man Simon Linke, who was in Orme's pay," continued Graeme, "buying votes which led to his chief's undoing. His evidence was that he believed he was intended to secure those votes. The Inquiry pronounced against Orme, who afterwards discharged Linke.

"After the murder, Linke was arrested on suspicion of complicity, though he had little motive for any deadly grudge against Massingham—none, indeed, save his dismissal from Orme's employ, and he had quickly obtained another Berth. Mas-

singham called on Linke an hour before the murder was committed, and asked for information about the bribery. Linke will tell you his story in the witness-box. He was able to prove that he was in his bed when the crime took place. The police released him."

Massingham, said the Crown Counsel, having visited the six voters who had been bribed, consulted Linke, and, after writing a letter to Sir Melmoth Craven, went personally to Orme's hotel, evidently with the intention of confronting Orme with this new evidence and demanding his explanation. The events that led to Orme's discovery in the presence of the dying man were skilfully outlined, together with the evidence of the landlord and the police.

"It is clear, gentlemen," said Graeme, "that there was a quarrel between the two men; the candidate who was unseated, and the man who had brought about his downfall. I shall submit that all the evidence leads to one conclusion. In a fit of passion and vengeance, with a deadly weapon—the trench dagger—ready to his hand, Orme struck the blow that cost Massingham his life. It was easy to thrust the damning bank-notes—the cause of Massingham's visit—into the fire. How else shall we account for the fact that they have never

been found? The deed was done, beyond recall, and Orme might have got away, to elude the police, perhaps, for some little time. He had not the chance. The crime had been committed, possibly less than a minute, when the landlord of the hotel, warned by the blood-stained ceiling, came in and found Orme with the body. That is a brief outline of the case, gentlemen, and it remains for you to hear the witnesses."

The Crown Counsel paused, and every eye in Court was turned upon the prisoner, sitting quietly in the dock. There were some who marvelled at the lack of emotion in his face.

"An' that's that," muttered a spectator to the man beside him. "May I never be up against it like yon chap behind the bar. Amen."

"Aye," murmured his companion, "but wait a bit. Queer things happen in an Assize Court, an' thou hasn't heard t' other side."

"Call Sir Melmoth Craven."

The member for Westington walked into the court, entered the box, raised the testament with a slim white hand, and took the oath. He looked extremely grave and dignified.

"You were, I believe, on the best of terms with the late Herbert Massingham, Sir Melmoth?" said Graeme.

"Very much so," said Sir Melmoth, "he was more than my agent; he was my friend and adviser."

"Had you any suspicion yourself, and before Massingham informed you, that anything wrong had been done by the other side in the election?"

Craven replied that he had none whatever. Sir Gerald Graeme led him through the events of the election by several short questions. It was shown that the detection of the bribery and its proof were wholly Massingham's work.

"Was there, to your knowledge, any ill-feeling, previous to this, between Orme and Massingham?" asked the Crown Counsel.

"I fear there was, on Orme's side, at least," said Craven. "A week earlier, on the twenty-fifth, when Orme was in the Market Square, Massingham approached him and offered to shake hands, saying he hoped the struggle would be a fair and straightforward one on both sides. It was his first meeting with Orme."

"What did Orme reply?"

"He flew into a sudden passion, replying with great heat that Massingham was a scoundrel, and was working for a scoundrel," said Sir Melmoth calmly. "Massingham was hustled by some rough characters who were present. Certain supporters

of mine resented this, and there was a disturbance in which the police intervened."

"You witnessed this yourself?"

"I did. I had just passed through the crowd in my car, and was within earshot when it happened. Hundreds witnessed it."

"Had you ever heard it suggested before then, that Massingham was a scoundrel?"

"Never. He was universally respected, on both sides, as an honest and straightforward man."

"Did Orme afterwards make an apology for this incident?"

"None whatever."

"What was Massingham's view? Was he inclined to be revengeful?"

"No. I was more annoyed than he. Massingham told me he objected to personalities in politics, and that to make much capital out of the affair would be undignified."

"Did Massingham pursue the bribery charge vindictively?"

"Not at all. Having discovered there was bribery, he put the matter and the proofs into the hands of the officials, as he was bound to do."

"After Orme was unseated was Massingham satisfied?"

"Yes. But he informed me that he considered

Orme was personally responsible for the bribery, and had had knowledge of it."

The Crown Counsel glanced down at his brief.

"When did you last see Massingham alive?"

"About noon on the day of his death. He told me he was still following up the matter of the bribery. I was not greatly interested. I told him I should probably have to leave for Liverpool that night. I thanked him heartily for all that he had done for me. I did not see him again.

"At seven-fifteen that evening, finding it necessary that I should go to Liverpool at once, I left Westington in my car with my luggage. Some letters were handed to me by the hotel manager as I left. Among them was a note from Massingham. I read it in the car, while travelling."

"What was in that letter?"

"Massingham had written me hurriedly that he had fresh proofs concerning the bribery, and wished to see me. I could not return, however. I was not greatly interested. I tore up the note, and, on reaching Liverpool, I wrote to Massingham from the Grand Hotel."

"Is this your reply?" said Graeme, holding up a letter. Sir Melmoth said it was.

"This letter," said Graeme to the jury, "which was written at Liverpool, arrived at Westington

next morning, addressed to Massingham, and was impounded by the police. I will read it.

"'DEAR MASSINGHAM:

Many thanks for your note. Very possibly you are right about Orme. But I am not inclined to trouble about it any further. The seat, unjustly won, is now mine, thanks to your keenness and the sharp watch you kept. I do not want to go on kicking a beaten man. Unless the party thinks it necessary to take further action I should let the matter slide, and I am very busy now. However, do as you think best. My warmest thanks, once more, my dear Massingham, for your helpfulness.

"'Yours sincerely,

"'MELMOTH CRAVEN.'

"A very proper letter," said Graeme, as he laid it down. "Would you have approved of Massingham visiting Orme, had you known he was going to do so?"

"I should have thought it unwise, considering how Orme had already treated him," answered Craven, "but Massingham went without my knowledge. When he did so, I had left Westington. I never saw Massingham again, alive."

The Crown Counsel ended his questions, and sat down.

Vernon Haggard, K.C., rose to cross-examine, and there was a stir in the court. The famous barrister made a commanding figure. Those who knew him in private life would have been struck by the change. He looked very different in his thick, neat grey wig; the loose lips were firm and close-drawn; intellectual power shone from the broad forehead and keen eyes.

He smiled slightly as he faced Craven, and his manner and voice were pleasant and courteous. In court, Haggard was never a bully. In the earlier stages of examination, at least, witnesses usually liked him.

"Massingham's death was, of course, a great shock to you, Sir Melmoth?" he said softly.

"The greatest shock I ever experienced," agreed Craven. "I have hardly yet recovered from it."

"You have hardly yet recovered from it," repeated Haggard, nodding. "This most sympathetic letter that you sent him," Haggard held it up, "at what time was it written?"

"About eleven o'clock at night, in Liverpool. Soon after I arrived there."

"At that time, then, Massingham was dead?"

"Yes."

"Did you know he was dead, Sir Melmoth?"

There was the fraction of a second's pause.

"Why do you hesitate?" said Haggard sharply.

"I hesitated because the question amazed me," said Craven. "Of course, I did not know Massingham was dead. One does not write letters to a dead man."

"It would be a curious thing to do, certainly," replied Haggard pleasantly, as a titter of laughter arose in some quarters of the court. "You can imagine no circumstance, Sir Melmoth, in which it might serve a useful purpose to write a letter to a man one knew was dead?"

"Not unless the writer were mad," said Craven drily.

"Yet there is sometimes method in madness," said the K.C. very quietly. The tittering in court ceased, and there was a curious silence. Craven seemed calm and unmoved, yet an indefinable hostility and watchfulness seemed to cling to him. It was as though an invisible barrier of barbed wire had erected itself suddenly between Craven and the Counsel for the defence.

"You state on oath, Sir Melmoth, that you did not know when you wrote that letter, that Massingham was dead?" persisted Haggard, quite courteously.

"On oath, I state it. It was impossible for me to know any such thing."

"Quite so. You left Westington at seven-fifteen. When did you arrive in Liverpool?"

"About ten-fifteen."

"The distance is forty-two miles by road. That is an average of fourteen miles per hour. Would you call it good travelling, Sir Melmoth, for a six-cylinder car?"

"It is a very fair average for night motoring in indifferent weather, with several towns to pass through," said Craven carelessly, "but my chauffeur found two cylinders missing after we passed Cranley, and we had to reduce speed. I left the car at Liverpool next day and went to London by train."

"At what point on the road were you then at eight o'clock?"

"I did not keep a log-book of times and distances"; said Craven curtly; "it would be about fifteen miles south of Westington."

"Very good. That is near enough," said Haggard pleasantly. "Let us turn to another point. You were handed several letters by the hotel manager when you started. How many letters?"

"I cannot be certain. Eight or nine, perhaps. My mail is always a heavy one. I am a busy man."

"No doubt. And Massingham's note was one of these letters? There were special instructions to the hotel that you should receive it before you left. When did you open that letter?"

"In the car. About three quarters of an hour after leaving Westington," continued Craven, in answer to Haggard's questions. "There is electric light in the car. I read the letter by that."

"Where is the letter?"

"I tore it up and threw it out of the car window. I did not wish to keep it, or to act on it."

"Can you repeat to the jury the wording of that letter?"

"No," said Craven, "I did not learn it by heart. Roughly it ran as follows: 'I have clear evidence that Orme himself planned the bribery, and I think this should be followed up thoroughly, as he is not a fitting candidate to stand for Parliament, now or at any other time.'"

Craven repeated, on oath, that this was the gist of the letter.

"And yet the letter does not now exist," said Haggard blandly. "You had, you say, at least eight other letters. Did you tear them all up and throw them out of the window? If so, the Westington road must have borne the appearance of a paper chase."

"I did not," said Craven shortly; "some of them were business letters, and worth keeping."

"But not, apparently, this one, which affects the prisoner in the dock vitally." Haggard leaned forward a little. "Will you swear, Sir Melmoth, that you did not wait till you reached Liverpool, and burn that letter?"

"M' lud!" exclaimed Sir Gerald Graeme, jumping up. "I object to that question! This is unprecedented. There is no suggestion of any charge against Sir Melmoth Craven. Unless my learned friend intends to produce evidence that the letter was burned——"

"My lord," said Haggard firmly, "the prosecution include in their case against the prisoner a letter, which they do not produce. I am entitled to ask whatever questions I may consider will throw light on that letter."

"Mr. Haggard is within his rights," said the Judge calmly, without moving a muscle, and the Crown Counsel sat down.

"Answer the question, Sir Melmoth," persisted Haggard.

"I have already told you I tore the letter up. I did not burn it," said Craven, whose face was flushed dark red, and whose eyes were angry. "I wish I had kept the letter. It is unfortunate that I did not."

"How unfortunate, the jury will decide," replied Haggard gently. "Your reason for destroying this letter then—was what?"

"I did not care whether any further action were taken against Orme or not, that was the reason."

"You harboured no ill-feeling against Orme, then?"

"Beyond a natural contempt for a man who would cheat in an election—none."

"Even though he had publicly called you a scoundrel?"

"He called Massingham a scoundrel, also," said Craven contemptuously.

"Would you describe a financier who made a corner in drugs as a scoundrel, Sir Melmoth?"

"I do not understand you," said Craven slowly.

"Surely, it is a simple question. For his own private profit, a man secures the entire control of drugs that are vital to the nation's health—in a time of epidemic. Would not 'scoundrel' be a fair description of him? You prefer not to answer. Do you know a financier called Steinberg?"

"Yes."

"Did you, in partnership with Steinberg, engineer such a corner in drugs three weeks ago?"

"I decline to answer such a question."

"I have documentary proofs that you did so," said Haggard. "I will lay them before you——"

"M' lud, this is monstrous!" said Graeme, rising quickly. "What has this to do with the innocence or guilt of the prisoner?"

"You are entitled to cross-examine the witness on the evidence he has given, Mr. Haggard," said the Judge, "but we have nothing to do with financial operations." He turned to the jury. "You will consider the last question as not having been put, gentlemen."

Haggard bowed. He seemed perfectly content. "Are you acquainted with one Simon Linke, Sir Melmoth?" he asked.

"No. I am not."

"You know he is the man who bribed Orme's voters?"

"Yes, and destroyed Orme's chances of sitting in Parliament," said Craven.

Haggard put his hands behind his back, and smiled at the witness.

"Mr. Linke did you a very good turn then, Sir Melmoth," he said, and a laugh went round the court. Every eye was on Craven.

"He did Orme a very bad turn," was Craven's reply.

"Quite so. Do you regard Orme as a fool, Sir Melmoth?"

"I regard him as an extremely clever man," said Craven drily.

"Yet your view is that he paid Linke to do him this very bad turn. Would not that have been the act of a fool?"

"The cleverest men make mistakes sometimes," answered Craven.

"They do indeed. Since we are on the subject of brains, you also are a very clever man, Sir Melmoth."

"It is kind of you to say so," said Craven sarcastically.

"I think the jury will agree with me." There was a moment's pause, and Haggard leaned forward slightly. "Will you state upon oath, Sir Melmoth, that Simon Linke is unknown to you personally? Will you say on oath that he has never visited you?"

The Crown Counsel frowned, and seemed about to rise. But he thought better of it.

"I say on oath," replied Craven, looking Haggard full in the face, "that I have never spoken to Simon Linke in my life."

"Thank you, Sir Melmoth. That will do," said Haggard blandly, and sat down.

The Crown Counsel rose to re-examine. He cut it very short, however, and did not seem anxious to ask many questions. He led Craven through a repetition of his denials.

"The letter you wrote to Massingham was a true expression of your feelings, Sir Melmoth?" he concluded. "You bore no rancour against Orme?"

"None," said Craven, "save a natural satisfaction that the bribery which illegally won the election was unmasked. A legislator who represents the People should be above suspicion, and honesty in politics must always be dear to an Englishman."

Mr. Vernon Haggard smiled sardonically, and Sir Melmoth Craven left the box. A juryman shifted uneasily on his seat.

"Whatever Orme may be," he murmured to his neighbour, "this chap Craven is a dirty dog. I wish the judge had let us see that evidence."

"I wish I may never be cross-examined by Haggard, if I should have anything up my sleeve," said the other juryman piously. "All the same, I think Haggard's making bricks without straw."

The next witness was Marlow, the landlord of Orme's hotel. He related, in answer to the questions, how Massingham had come to the hotel, asked for Orme, and gone to Orme's room. The

whole story, as already given, was repeated in full detail.

The tale could hardly be made blacker against the prisoner than it was. The tide of evidence turned in full flood against him.

Haggard, however, handled the landlord without gloves. Marlow had to admit that he did not know whether Orme was in the house or not, when Massingham went upstairs—that he could not say when Orme came in—that he was reading a paper in the office and that half a dozen people might have entered and left the house, for all he knew to the contrary—that the bloodstain on the ceiling might have been there for many minutes before he saw it. The witness, in Haggard's hands, began to doubt the evidence of his own senses, and grew bewildered.

"The sight of the dying man was a great shock to you?" suggested Haggard sympathetically.

"Awful," agreed the landlord with a shiver.

"You say the prisoner laid hands on you, saying 'out of the way.' Did it not occur to you that Orme's chief anxiety was to summon a doctor and the police?"

"It didn't," replied Marlow. "I shoved him back into the room and locked the door." It was the exploit he was most proud of.

"And ran to the door yelling for the constables," said Haggard. "Your excitement was very natural. What sort of night was it?"

"Foggy, sir."

"I suggest the fog got into your head, Mr. Marlow," said Haggard soothingly, and the court laughed. "Is it any clearer now?"

"Not much, sir," said Marlow plaintively. It took thirty seconds for the laughter to die down.

"You are not quite so sure now, Mr. Marlow, whether you trapped a murderer red-handed, or whether, in your precipitation, you threw a specious appearance of guilt upon an innocent man?"

Marlow's brow shone with perspiration.

"I would rather leave that question to the jury, sir," he said.

"A sound answer at last," said Haggard. "I, also, would rather leave it to the jury. That will do Mr. Marlow."

The Crown Counsel re-examined, putting such questions as strengthened and solidified the more deadly evidence that Marlow had given, and neutralising, as far as he could, the effect of Haggard's cross-examination. Haggard did not follow it up. He was satisfied.

The police sergeant who had arrested Orme was now called. His story of the arrest was given, and

he also was cross-examined, but only lightly. The C.I.D. inspector followed, gave his evidence, and was subjected to much more searching questions by the defence. The trench dagger, with the grim traces of the crime still upon it, and the mark of the thumb-print, was produced, and afforded the audience in court the morbid pleasure that such things always do. To many of the public, it was the tit-bit of the trial.

"Facsimiles of this thumb-print have been taken?" said Haggard.

"Of course, sir," said the witness. "They have been furnished to the defence."

"Exactly. And that thumb-print was not made by the prisoner?"

"It is certainly not the prisoner's," said the inspector, "I can state that on oath."

"There exists somewhere, then, a man whose thumb made that print on the dagger. Have the police traced him?"

"No, sir. No such man has been found."

Haggard sat down with the air of a man who has established his main point.

Outhwaite, the cotton-spinner from whom Massingham had bought back the five-pound note which had been given him as a bribe, was next called. As he entered the box he looked across at

Orme and flushed a deep red. His hands trembled slightly as he took the oath.

In answer to Graeme, he told how he had been offered the job in the mill by Linke, and paid the five pounds, on the understanding that he should vote for Orme.

He described Massingham's visit, and how Massingham had paid him ten pounds to get into his possession the original note. The witness answered Graeme's question with obvious reluctance.

"What did you say to Massingham," asked Haggard, rising, "when he first came to your house?"

"I told him to go to blazes!" said Outhwaite savagely. The usual titter followed among the audience.

"Anything else?"

"I said that if I'd known takin' the dirty money would hurt Orme, I'd never h' touched it."

"And Massingham, replied?"

"He said: 'I'm goin' to look into that business. I'll give you ten pounds for that fiver if you've got it.'"

The judge made a verbatim of the answer. So did some of the jurymen.

"Thank you, Mr. Outhwaite, that will do," said Haggard.

The Crown Counsel looked a little put out, and called for Simon Linke.

Simon Linke was called and sworn.

His sharp white face, with the stamp of cunning upon it, was a contrast to the police officials who had preceded him. Sir Gerald Graeme took him, by a series of questions, through the oft-told tale of his interview with Orme, and the orders that were given him. He insisted that he thought he was doing what Orme required of him. The prisoner's case began to look better. Linke was a bad witness.

He told his story of Massingham's visit to his house. He had gone to bed, he said, though it was not yet eight in the evening. His wife brought him down to see Massingham. They were left alone together.

"Mr. Massingham said to me," declared Linke, "that he had got proofs that Orme arranged the bribery. 'Linke,' he said to me, 'you know more than you told them at the inquiry, and I want you to testify again when the case comes up, as it will. Orme is a cheat,' he said, 'and I'm going to make sure that a man like that doesn't stand for Parliament again. He's left you in the lurch, Linke' said Massingham to me, 'and I want you to tell the whole truth.'"

"What was your reply?" said Counsel.

"I said, 'Mr. Massingham, you're on the wrong track. I've already told all I know, and I don't want to be mixed up in it any more. I'm a working man,' I said, 'and I've lost one job already through this blessed election. No more politics for me. If you want to know anything, you'd better ask Orme.'"

"What reply did Massingham make to that?"

"'That's what I'm going to do,' he said to me, 'I shall go and see Orme; he shall tell me the whole truth or stand the consequences. I see your point of view, Linke,' said Massingham as he went, 'and I hope it will be a lesson to you not to mix yourself up in dirty work again.' I told him I was sorry I ever touched it, and wouldn't if I'd known what I was doing. Then he wished me good-night and went. I never saw him again."

Mr. Haggard rose.

"So you, too, are a friend of Orme's, and wished to shield him?" he asked blandly.

"I didn't wish him any harm," said Linke. "He'd always treated me decently enough. I'm a man——"

"Thank you, but never mind about that. The jury will probably decide what sort of a man you are, Mr. Linke. Did you ask your employer for

three hundred pounds a few days before the election, which he refused point-blank to give you?"

"Yes, I did," said Linke defiantly. "I wanted it. I saw no harm in asking for it. And he refused. I told all that at the inquiry. But I thought, from what he said, that I might get the three hundred after the election was over. So I took on those voters for the mill, an' paid 'em in advance with the cheque I had charge of."

"So you never got the three hundred at all?"

"No. The whole thing came out. And Orme fired me. I can see now, he couldn't well help himself."

"Were you surprised at Massingham visiting you in the way he did?"

"Yes, I was."

"Had you spoken to Massingham at any time previous to this visit—within a few days?" asked Haggard, almost carelessly.

"No, it was the first time I'd seen him, since the inquiry."

"Never had any conversation with him—about the weather, or kindred matters—between the inquiry and the hour of his honouring you with a call?"

"No."

"Do you state on oath," said Haggard suddenly,

with his most formidable manner, "that you did not meet and consult with Massingham in Oldham Gardens an hour before his visit to you!'

"No, I did not," answered Linke deliberately.

The Judge interposed.

"Remember you are on oath, witness," he said, looking keenly at Linke, "and be careful how you reply. You did not speak to Massingham on any occasion before his visit to you?"

Linke looked shaken. He was a little paler, and the insistence on the question was evidently unexpected.

"I don't remember any such thing," he answered.

"Answer yes or no!" returned Haggard inexorably. "Did Massingham meet you in Oldham Gardens?"

"No!" replied Linke, looking him in the face. The Judge sat back with tightened lips.

"I will ask you to take particular note of that answer, gentlemen," said Haggard to the jury and turned to the witness again.

"You have told us that the three hundred pounds you expected as a reward for this bribery which ruined Orme was not paid," he said slowly. "Will you swear that it was not paid you from another source—in order that Orme might be unseated?"

"I object to that question, m' lud!" exclaimed Graeme. "It cannot be put unless the defence is going to call evidence that such payment was made."

"My intention, my lord," said Haggard obstinately, "is to convince the jury that this witness is totally unworthy of credence. I shall call a witness to disprove at least one of the statements he has made on oath, and I am acting under the well-known legal maxim, *falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*. I am entitled to have that question answered."

"Answer the question," said the Judge to Linke.

"No," said Linke abruptly, "I got no money at all. Not from that source nor any other." He spoke with an air of injured defiance. "The man doesn't live that can prove I ever got a penny!"

"The man does not live?" said Haggard quietly. "Do you mean, then, that the man who could prove it is dead?"

Linke turned a curious grey colour. He swayed slightly.

"I mean that I never had any money at all—from any one," he said.

"Stand down," said Haggard gently, "unless my learned friend wishes to question you further."

Sir Gerald Graeme had no such wish.

"Call Miss Margaret Garth," he said.

Margaret entered the court, and stepped into the box. There was a swift stir throughout the room, and every eye was turned upon her. Her pallor, and the wonderful grace with which she moved, endowed her with a beauty that was almost unearthly. For the moment her eyes met Orme's as he sat silent in the dock; the blood flushed to her cheeks, and ebbed again. She raised the Testament to her lips, set it down, and turned to face the Counsel for the prosecution.

CHAPTER XXI

THE WOMAN TESTIFIES

"On November the first, the day on which the tragedy took place, you were staying at Dereham Hall?" asked Graeme.

"Yes," said Margaret. Her voice was scarcely audible, and trembled slightly. Sir Gerald Graeme's tone was courteous, and even sympathetic.

"I realise, Miss Garth, that this must be painful to you," he said, almost apologetically, "it is necessary, however, that I should ask you one or two brief questions as to the time and place. Mr. Orme called upon you at Dereham on the first. Can you tell the jury at what time he left the house?"

"Yes," said Margaret mechanically. "It was ten minutes past seven."

"You are sure of that?"

"I am sure. I noticed the time immediately he had gone, by the clock in the hall."

"Thank you," said the Crown Counsel. "It is all I have to ask."

He sat down, but Haggard rose at once.

"I also have some questions to put, and I shall be brief," he said. Margaret met his gaze steadily. Haggard lowered his eyes, and seemed to be looking at his brief.

"When Mr. Orme left you at ten minutes past seven," he said slowly, "was he in good spirits, Miss Garth? I mean, did he seem happy, or the reverse?"

A warm flush crept over Margaret's pale cheeks. She paused.

"Yes," she said quietly, "I think he seemed happy."

There was a curiously strained look on Haggard's usually impassive features.

"I have a reason for asking," he said, "and for calling attention to this point. Mr. Orme seemed happy when he left Dereham Hall. Will you tell the court, Miss Garth, what happened during that visit of Mr. Orme's?"

"Must I answer that question?" said Margaret in a low voice.

"If you please."

"Mr. Orme asked me to be his wife," said Margaret. "And I consented—very gladly."

Dead silence reigned in the court. Three hundred pairs of eyes were on Margaret.

"Although Orme had lost his seat in Parliament, and in the eyes of men was under a cloud," said Haggard gently, "that did not affect your answer?"

"I gave my answer the more willingly—if that were possible," said Margaret, and she raised her head with a little pathetic touch of pride. "For he had the more need of me."

There was a stir among the spectators, and Haggard paused to let the effect sink home.

"We have heard, even from the Counsel for the prosecution," said Haggard, "that Orme once saved your life, under circumstances of great danger to himself. It was then more than mere gratitude that you have felt towards him?"

Margaret answered quietly and fearlessly.

"If you mean, did I love Mr. Orme," she said, "my answer is that I did—and that I do."

Haggard bowed, and sat down. Margaret retired, her head bowed, and escaped to hide as best she might the hot tears that would not be kept back. There were wet eyes among the spectators also.

"Not evidence," murmured a junior barrister to his companion, "but something that tells better with a jury. Graeme was a fool to call the girl."

"Graeme could not help himself," replied the

other barrister, "and Haggard has trumped his suit. Do you think he'll call the prisoner?"

"Doubt it. Orme would be a bad witness, and Haggard would lose the last word. But," said the speaker slowly, "he's got hard facts against him."

Margaret Garth was the last of the witnesses for the Crown. Haggard called the first for the defence. This was one Lenthall, an overlooker in a cotton-mill, and connected neither with the bribery nor the election.

"Where were you at six o'clock on November the first, Mr. Lenthall?" asked Haggard.

The witness replied that he was in the bar of the "Green Man," opposite Oldham Gardens. That Simon Linke was there also. That Linke was spending money freely and offered him a drink and a cigar. He refused. Linke was the worse for drink, though not noisy. He seemed in a quarrelsome mood, and abused the witness for refusing. Linke left the bar with Outhwaite, who was also present.

"Did you see Linke again?"

"Yes, I saw him sittin' on a bench under a tree in the Gardens, ten minutes later with another man."

"Did you know the other man by sight?"

"Aye. It was Massingham. They was talkin'."

"Did either of them see you?"

The witness thought not. He had passed behind the trees, on his way through the Gardens. He attached no importance to the incident. He passed within fifty feet of the two men, and could say on oath that the second man was Massingham.

This caused a buzz of sensation in court. Graeme cross-examined, but failed to shake the witness's certainty that it was Massingham. The Judge ordered Simon Linke to be recalled.

He was sworn, cautioned sternly by the Judge, and the question put to him again. Linke was pale-faced and obstinate. He held to it that he had not seen Massingham in the Gardens, and had never sat under the tree. If any one else said he had, it was not true.

The Judge, who put the questions, received the denials of Linke with a hard face and tightened lips. Linke left the box.

"I shall call no more witnesses for the defence, my lord," said Haggard with a grim smile.

The Crown Counsel rose, his papers before him, and addressed the jury. He made a keen and deadly appeal for a conviction, marshalling the plain and visible evidence against the prisoner, which, he claimed, had not been shaken to the extent of one iota.

The discrepancy in Linke's evidence, he said, was no more then the word of one man against another. It was of no great importance, even if Linke had met Massingham in Oldham Gardens. What was important, was that Massingham had visited Linke at his house, and had gone straight thence—as he declared he would—to the Bell Hotel, where he met his death in Orme's rooms and by means of Orme's knife.

"I ask you, gentlemen," he said, "to disregard the unsupported attacks made upon Sir Melmoth Craven, the dead man's friend, against whom not even the Counsel for the defence has dared to make anything so absurd as an accusation of complicity. Complicity with whom—with what? It is enough, surely, that Sir Melmoth Craven has lost a generous and industrious ally, whom he had left behind at Westington in the full power of health and strength.

"I ask you to clear your minds of side issues, of love stories, of sentiment, and of theories. Massingham, a man of clean and honest life, universally respected—Massingham, who did his plain duty in showing up a fraudulent conspiracy, is dead—cruelly murdered. He had no enemy but Orme. We hear of him calling at Orme's hotel—alone. A few minutes later, as the prosecution

has shown, Massingham is found dying, with the prisoner beside him. Has the defence, with all its ingenious manœuvres, shaken for one moment the common-sense explanation that all men must find to the simple question?

"You have seen that the prisoner, for all his record of courage and service, is a man of violent and uncontrolled temper. Before this issue ever arose, we find that he publicly insulted this man who had never harmed him, and refused to offer any apology, though urged to it by his own friends.

"How much more then are the passions of such a man likely to rise, when confronted suddenly in his own quarters with the one who had caused his downfall? You may seek to find excuses in your minds, for an accused man with a brave record. The prisoner, perhaps, has served in a rough school, where human life is cheap, and he may have honestly thought that his rival had wronged him unjustly. Such a plea has been hinted at, but it cannot stand. No man may take the law into his own hands, far less may he take the life of his brother man.

"The defence has attempted to show that no proof has been given of the prisoner being present in the hotel when Massingham arrived there.

Where, then, was he? You have heard the evidence of Miss Garth, that Orme left Dereham Hall at ten minutes past seven. Between that time and the moment of his discovery by Marlow, no one set eyes on him. The distance from Dereham Hall to the Bell Hotel is under two miles. Even the slowest walker could not take fifty minutes to cover that distance. Massingham arrived at the hotel at ten minutes to eight. It is stated that Orme lost his way in the fog, and was delayed. You have his word for it," said Graeme grimly, "and nothing more.

"Gentlemen, there is no need for me to say more. The proofs of guilt against the prisoner are surely overwhelming. I leave the issue in your hands, with confidence that you will return the verdict that justice demands."

The Crown Counsel resumed his seat amid dead silence, and Vernon Haggard, after a brief pause, rose to make his last effort for the life and liberty of the man in the dock. In all the crowded court, there was but one other who knew that on Haggard's skill depended not only Orme's freedom, but his own.

Haggard's big, commanding form looked a tower of strength as he stood on his feet. He threw back his gown, and there was a curious flash in his keen

eyes as he glanced round the court and turned himself squarely towards the jury.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he said in a steady, clear voice, "we have heard many reasons, somewhat luridly expressed, why Mr. John Orme, V.C., must have murdered, and did actually murder Herbert Massingham."

Haggard leaned one hand on the table and looked at the jury with a dry smile.

"Let us examine a little of the evidence, which has been set before you to show why Orme should murder Massingham. For without a motive, the reason for this murder falls to the ground.

"We are told that disgrace and exposure threatened John Orme, the proofs of which were in the hands of Massingham. Where are those proofs? 'Probably burnt,' says the Prosecution. 'We think Orme burnt them.' Mark that, gentlemen.

"The proofs are missing. What evidence have we, then, that they ever existed? 'Very simple,' says the Prosecution, 'Massingham wrote a letter to Sir Melmoth Craven. That letter was handed, sealed, to the manager of the White Rose Hotel, and passed on to Craven. It contained Massingham's accusation against Orme.'

"And so, gentlemen, we find Sir Melmoth Craven brought into the witness-box, and he tells

us, on oath, what that letter contained. It contained, he says, a statement by Massingham that Orme was personally guilty of bribery. But where is that letter? Would you not like to see it, gentlemen? So should I. 'I tore it up,' says Sir Melmoth, 'I scattered the pieces out of the window. It is very unfortunate. But I come here to tell you that it accused Orme.'"

Haggard paused.

"Massingham's proofs are burnt—Massingham's letter has been destroyed by Craven. What have we left, to prove a motive on Orme's part? Why that, gentlemen, is even simpler," said Haggard blandly, "we have the sworn statement of Mr. Simon Linke. Admirable!" The ring of gentle irony in Haggard's tone was perfection. "We actually have Linke's word for it.

"You have seen Mr. Linke in the witness-box. I wonder what you think of him? On some points he is admirably frank, you will agree. He says, 'I was very hard up,' A thing, of course, that may happen to any of us. 'I asked Mr. Orme for three hundred pounds,' he continued, 'in return for which I would push his election along for him.' But Mr. Orme declined to pay three hundred pounds to the interesting and modest Linke.

"'This is unfortunate,' says Mr. Linke to him-

self, 'however, I will do good to him in spite of himself. And I will do it for nothing. I will bribe voters for him—with his own money.' He does so—in as crass and blundering a manner as possible. The plot is discovered, and an inquiry before the Justices results in the unseating of Orme."

Haggard made an expressive gesture with his large white hands.

"I should like," he said, "to ask a few questions of the members of that inquiry. I should like, as Charles Lamb once said, to examine their bumps. However, perhaps they thought they had no choice but to unseat Orme, for a thing that was done in his name. Election law is a curious thing, gentlemen—almost as curious as criminal law.

"To continue with Mr. Linke. He was the last man, but one, to see Massingham alive. What did Massingham say to him? 'He told me,' says Linke, 'that he had proofs that Orme was personally guilty of bribery.'"

Haggard placed both his hands on his hips.

"I do not think," he said, "that I ever heard thinner evidence offered to a jury. It consists of three items. Item one—a couple of bank-notes that have vanished into the unknown. Item two —a letter that has been torn up, but is quoted to

you by Orme's political rival, at present enjoying the seat in Parliament that Orme won. Item three—the bare word of an impecunious and self-confessed briber of voters, who has treated you all to a bare-faced exhibition of perjury in that box. A very curious trinity, gentlemen," said Haggard grimly, "on which you are asked to condemn a man to the gallows.

"I now invite you to follow me, for a brief space, in the footsteps of Massingham, and I think we shall find it enlightening. I will say in commencing, that I believe what all Westington agrees that a more honest man never lived. Let us see what he did.

"First we find Massingham acting busily for Craven in the election, and showing great industry. Orme wins; Massingham, that very same day, gets on the track of bribery. Orme is thrown down, Craven acquires the prize—the seat in Parliament. It is a triumph for Massingham's party. He may well rest on his laurels. And for many days he does so.

"Where do we find Massingham next?

"Where indeed? Sitting on a bench in the public gardens, and in the company of Linke. Linke, by the way, for reasons of his own, denies that this interview ever took place. He believed that no

man suspected it. Yet we have the testimony of a disinterested witness that this denial is a lie.

"Linke, the briber of voters, Linke, the impecunious but enterprising liar, has been imbibing freely in the Green Man, and is the worse for liquor," said Haggard slowly. "There is an old proverb of Horace, gentlemen, which says, 'In wine the truth comes out.' It is equally applicable to public-house whiskey. What more probable than that Linke, who dared not tell us the truth here in court, allowed it to leak out when he sat there with Massingham, his head muddled with drink.

"What is Massingham's next and immediate move? He leaves Linke. He goes straight to every one of the bribed voters, and offers a double price for the bank-notes which they received—from Linke.

"Having possessed himself of these, as we have learned, Massingham goes to Linke's house. Linke—half drunk—has gone to bed. No matter, Massingham has him roused and brought down."

Haggard stopped suddenly, and looked keenly at the jury.

"What is this strange thing—this new and burning proof, that Massingham has discovered?" he said impressively. "What is it that caused him

to bring Linke from his bed? Is it fresh proof against Orme? Is Massingham merely flogging a dead horse? Or," said Haggard grimly, "is it proof that Linke is more than a briber—that he is a conspirator and a felon! That his work was directed to Orme's undoing—Orme, who had refused to give or lend him three hundred pounds!"

There was absolute silence in the court-house. Everyone followed Haggard's words eagerly.

"Linke tells us it was the first. Linke, briber and perjurer, puts words into the dead man's mouth, which he asks you to believe. Massingham leaves. Linke returns—to bed. He did not leave it, we are told, till next morning. The police are satisfied." Haggard paused a moment. "I have done with Linke. We are still following Massingham—who at this moment is near his death.

"Massingham, then, goes straight to the White Rose Hotel and demands to see Sir Melmoth Craven. Craven is out. Massingham writes him a note, to be given him without fail on his return, and marked 'urgent.' He will return at eight. Massingham goes home, and at three minutes to eight telephones to the hotel asking if Craven has returned.

"The answer is that Craven left Westington

three quarters of an hour before—left it for good, taking his luggage, and Massingham's note.

"The man he so urgently wishes to see has left hurriedly. What does Massingham do? He goes to the Bell, very agitated, and in a hurry. He asks for Orme. The landlord does not know if Orme is in, and apparently does not care.

"Remember, gentlemen, that there is a thick fog—a fog like a blanket, obscuring all the town. The hotel is under-staffed—nobody is about. Nothing easier then for any man who wishes, to enter by either of the doors and stairways—and to leave again, unseen.

"So Massingham goes up. What is his errand? Is it to insult Orme, in his own rooms? Is it to hurl an accusation in his teeth, and triumph over him? He has never visited Orme before. Did he visit Orme when the bribery was first discovered? No!

"Did he go there to accuse Orme?" Haggard leaned forward, and his eyes shone keenly. "Did he not rather go to tell Orme that he had been unjustly unseated—that he was the victim of a conspiracy, and that, as an honest man, it was Massingham's duty to tell him so!"

Graeme stirred angrily in his seat, but the whole court hung on Haggard's words.

"I suggest to you, gentlemen, that this is a far likelier and truer version than the story the prosecution would have you believe—a story backed by evidence that is not worth a rap. Whose word have we for it? Linke's!

"Massingham did not find Orme—for Orme was not there. Within the next few minutes Massingham was murdered. It was to the interest of that murderer to close Massingham's lips for ever.

"Gentlemen," said Haggard grimly, "that murderer is still at large. For what we know, he may be sitting in this court with us." Haggard's eye passed swiftly over the witnesses and the spectators. "Or he may be—elsewhere. Wherever he is, at this moment he is praying for one thing only—that you may fasten the guilt of his crime upon the innocent man who stands in the dock!

"The crime, then, is committed, and home through the fog comes Orme. He goes to his room. The light is dim; the victim has been thrust beneath the table—for a minute he sees nothing. And then—discovery. Horrified, Orme stoops by the fallen man, places a hand on his heart—finds he is alive. The first need is a doctor. Orme runs for the door. He is met by the landlord.

"The landlord—Marlow, an honest blockhead, who, panic-stricken at what he sees, screams like a woman. He thrusts Orme back into the room, locks the door, and rushes for the police, yelling that he has trapped a murderer. The police arrive; Orme is arrested.

"The knife that killed Massingham belonged to Orme. It lay always upon Orme's desk—it was ready to the hand of the murderer. On it, printed clear and sharp on the steel, was a thumb-print. That thumb-print was not Orme's. Whose was it? 'We do not know,' say the police. 'We cannot trace the man. But, if we did, it would be no proof that he was the murderer.'

"Yet another flaw in the evidence! The lost proofs, the torn-up letter, the perjury of Linke—and now the untraced thumb-print. Yet they place in the dock this gallant soldier, this man with an unstained record, and ask you on the faith of tainted evidence to condemn him to the gallows!

"You are asked to believe that Orme, walking home to Westington the happiest man in England, secure in the knowledge that the woman he loved returns his love and has promised to marry him, now, in the same hour, brutally and callously murdered a weaker, older man than himself, and presented his own neck to the hangman. For the motive

of that crime, we are offered the word of a dismissed employee—and of a financier, Orme's keenest rival.

"You are asked to believe that Orme is a man of fierce passions—fully proved, of course," said Haggard contemptuously, "by the fact that he once addressed a few sharp words in an election, to his opponent's chief agent.

"There is one more accusation, gentlemen, so monstrous that I can hardly speak of it calmly.

"The Crown Counsel has told you that Orme has lately lived 'in a rough school where life is cheap,' and that, therefore, he might think himself entitled to retaliate violently on a man who had harmed him."

Sir Gerald Graeme flushed and bit his lip, as he realised how unerringly his one false step was to be brought home to him. Haggard's voice was bitter as death.

"This 'rough school,'" said Haggard in a ringing voice, "was the fighting front in France. There, for four years, Orme served his country; there he lived a life of discipline, and self-sacrifice, beloved by his men, feared only by the enemy. It is that 'rough life' that makes for self-control and thought for others.

"It may be, gentlemen, that some of you who

sit in that box, and on whose verdict the prisoner's life depends, have also served at the front. So much the worse for you!" said Haggard, with cutting irony. "For if, in the future, one of you should be so unfortunate as to be accused of murder on slight evidence, you will face an added danger. It may be said in court, that because in the past you shed your blood in the defence of England, therefore you are the more likely to commit a callous and brutal murder.

"That was the argument of the Crown Counsel, who, in this case, represents the King. Bear with me while I read you an account of a deed for which Orme received the Victoria Cross, the highest honour that can be bestowed, from the King's own hands."

In clear, moving tones, Haggard read the brief official story of Orme's V.C. to a court that listened to every syllable.

"This is the man," said Haggard very quietly, "whom you are asked to condemn on the evidence of three individuals; a blockhead—a perjurer—and a financier. Save for the one circumstance—the one accident—that the prisoner was found in the company of the dying man, all the evidence is wind. And tainted wind, at that. I have done. I leave the issue in your hands, with perfect con-

fidence that your verdict will declare to all men the innocence of this gallant young Englishman, and that he will leave this court a free man."

A swift outburst of applause followed the close of Haggard's speech, with difficulty repressed.

"Haggard at his best!" murmured the junior barrister with admiration. "He's a giant. Who'll fill his place when he takes the judgeship!"

His companion did not answer, for his eyes were on the Judge, who was about to sum up.

There was something almost inhuman about Mr. Justice Everedge, so cold and immovable was he, so divorced from all sentiment, from all sympathy—from everything save cool reason and logic. His voice was like the impassive voice of a phonograph, relentlessly emitting facts.

"You have heard the evidence on both sides, gentlemen," he said, "and the speeches for the prosecution and defence. It only remains that I should direct you as to what is, and what is not, permissible in considering your verdict.

"Two motives have been put forward, as showing that the prisoner had a reason for committing such a crime, and these motives, though apparently similar, should be regarded as quite distinct from each other.

"First there is the fact—Massingham discovered

evidence which, whatever its merits, caused the unseating of Orme. That is unquestioned.

"Secondly, there is the alleged motive—that on November the first Massingham discovered much stronger proofs directly inculpating Orme, and was about to make use of them.

"Since Massingham is dead and cannot testify, the evidence that these proofs existed rests on the word of two witnesses, Sir Melmoth Craven and Simon Linke. You have heard Sir Melmoth Craven's story. He has told you that Massingham wrote him a letter, which was not produced.

"Testimony of that nature is of little value unless it is corroborated. It is corroborated in this instance to some extent, by the story of the second witness, Linke. It has been very plainly shown that Linke is a bad character, and unreliable. It is for you to say whether you believe him. If you consider his story is not to be believed, then the evidence of Sir Melmoth Craven is still further weakened. It is open to you, therefore, to reject the evidence of this second motive altogether.

"But, gentlemen," continued the Judge, "if you reject that evidence, and expel the second motive from your minds, you should equally reject the suggestion put forward by the Counsel for the defence, that a plot was laid for the prisoner's undo-

ing, and that Massingham had discovered it. For no evidence of any sort has been laid before you to support that theory. No witness has been called upon the point, and no proof put forward. Men are neither condemned nor exonerated by theories.

"There remains the fact that the prisoner owed the loss of his seat to Massingham, that Massingham visited Orme's rooms, and was found on the point of death, in the same room with Orme. It is for you to weigh carefully the evidence for and against Orme, to satisfy yourselves either that he committed this deed, or that he was innocent of it, and that some person unknown murdered Massingham.

"I will say here, gentlemen, that I have never, in a long experience, heard a defence more ably and brilliantly conducted than the defence of the prisoner in the dock. There is, however, a point which I must bring to your notice.

"If the prisoner did not commit this crime, by whom was the murder done? Massingham is dead. Yet all the resources of the police, all the efforts of the defence, have not availed to point a finger at any other man. The defence has shown not only skill, but masterly ingenuity. But while suggesting that some unknown person entered the

Bell Hotel unseen, committed the crime, and escaped unseen, yet the defence has failed to show either proof or reason for any such belief."

The Judge paused.

"Finally, gentlemen, it is not for you to allow any consideration of the prisoner's past services and record to affect your own decision. The question for you is, whether the prisoner is guilty or not guilty.

"If, on the evidence, you believe that the prisoner committed the crime, you have no option but to return a verdict of guilty.

"If you believe the prisoner did not commit the crime, you will, of course, return a verdict of not guilty.

"Thirdly, if you have any reasonable doubt, the prisoner is entitled to the benefit of that doubt, and you will return a verdict of not guilty. Having said so much, I will leave you to consider your verdict."

There was a rapid, whispered consultation in the box, and the foreman of the jury announced that they wished to retire. They filed out. The tension that had brooded over the court broke suddenly, and a subdued, eager buzz of conversation arose.

Margaret, still unveiled and deadly white, but

with head erect, sat in the well of the court, opposite the dock. Mrs. Garth looked at her silently, and presently spoke in a low whisper, placing her hand on the girl's arm. Margaret made no answer. But at last she rose, and, with a brave, pitiful look at Orme, left the court with her mother. In about a quarter of an hour Mrs. Garth returned alone. She resumed her seat in dead silence.

The jury were still absent. An hour passed. The second hour was drawing to its close, and yet the box was empty.

"Haggard's work," muttered the junior barrister to his friend; "but for him, there would have been a verdict of guilty without leaving the box."

"And now——?"

"Who can say what a jury will decide?" said the young barrister cynically. "Ah, here they come."

The jury entered the court and filed stolidly back into the box under the eyes of the spectators, the bulk of whom expected a verdict of not guilty. But Haggard ran his eyes swiftly over the faces of the jurymen, and his own face turned pulpy white.

The foreman answered the question. His voice broke hoarsely upon the dead hush of the courtroom.

"Guilty of wilful murder."

A sharp intaking of breath was heard on every

side. Mrs. Garth, hearing the words, sat as if turned to stone.

"We wish, my lord," said the foreman of the jury, "to add the strongest possible recommendation to mercy." He dropped heavily into his seat, trembling a little.

"Prisoner at the bar," said the Judge calmly, "have you any reason to give why the sentence of the court should not be passed upon you?"

"I have only to say," replied Orme steadily, "that I neither caused, nor at any time wished for, the death of Massingham. I am innocent."

"John Orme," said the Judge quietly, "you have been ably defended, and a jury of your countrymen has found you guilty of this crime. It is a crime that admits of only one sentence, and that sentence I pronounce."

Without further speech, without exhortation or warning the Judge donned the little square of black velvet, and in a cold, passionless voice, pronounced sentence of death.

The usual solemn hush, that always follows those dread words, prevailed. It was broken only by the faint sob of a woman, somewhere among the crowd in court. The sound did not come from Mrs. Garth. She neither spoke nor moved, but her head was slightly bowed.

John Orme looked across at her from the dock. He was pale, but his face was stern and set; in his eyes there was no fear or shrinking. He bowed silently to the Judge, and obedient to the warder's touch on his arm, turned and walked out between his two guards.

"A brave man," muttered the junior barrister, "and a thousand pities. He took it well."

"Aye," said his companion, in a curious whisper, "but look at Haggard."

The Counsel for the defence was ashen-grey, there was a strange, glazed look in his eyes. His hands fumbled blindly as he strove to collect his papers. Then, leaving them to his junior, he made his way out as the court rose.

. . . . . .

The afternoon express for London was hissing alongside the up platform. Haggard's big, burly figure, muffled in a grey overcoat, came out of the booking office, moving very wearily.

As he walked towards the train, Mrs. Garth passed close by him, on her way to a reserved compartment. She did not look at him, nor appear to see him; her eyes were pitiless and hard as flint. Haggard was aware of her as he went by, but he took no special notice. He seemed to be moving

in a world of his own, like a man walking in his sleep.

Haggard found an empty carriage, and subsided into a corner seat. Throughout the long run Londonwards he hardly moved, staring before him vacantly, as if lost in thought.

The train steamed into Euston; he obtained a taxi and reached his chambers. Unlocking the front door mechanically, he flung it back and walked into the luxuriously furnished library. He clicked on the electric light.

"So this is the end," he said dully.

He walked slowly the length of the room and back.

"Ruin, sure and beyond hope. As well expect pity from a tiger. Ruin, beggary—and disgrace in the eyes of all men. Pauper—bankrupt—outcast."

The broad, powerful forehead shone damp in the glow of the lamps, the loose lips had a pathetic drop. Suddenly they tightened and grew firm.

"No!" he said briefly, "there is—the other road."

He went to his desk, took out some sets of papers, went through them with great care, tied them neatly in three little bundles, and replaced them. He placed a sheet of clean foolscap on the

desk, and began to write. For some time he wrote with great deliberation; his handwriting was always strong and bold. When he had finished, he read the sheet through carefully, made a slight alteration, and placed it inside the desk.

He unlocked a drawer, from which he took a small, bright steel revolver, and looked at it curiously.

"It is good," he said, "to know that one has still one friend left."

He walked across to a deep easy-chair near the window, and seated himself on the arm of it. For a few moments he sat there, peering before him with thoughtful, deepset eyes. The tall plush curtains over the window behind him stirred gently, as if to the night breeze. Then he cocked the hammer of the revolver with his thumb, and raised it deliberately to his broad forehead.

CHAPTER XXII

A DEBT DISCHARGED

THE tall curtains behind Haggard parted suddenly, and with extraordinary swiftness a woman, clad in sombre black, moved to his side. A yellow hand tore the revolver from his grasp and thrust it out of reach.

Haggard turned with a gasp, and found himself staring into the eyes of Madame Vampire, that shone dimly behind the veil.

"Not that way, Mr. Vernon Haggard," she said quietly. "I will show you a better road."

Haggard gulped and stepped back a pace, gazing at her blankly.

"You!" he said in a whisper. "How came you here?"

"I have been here some time," she answered, her eyes watching him closely.

The barrister looked at her in silence, his face working. Then he moved towards her.

"Give me that pistol," he said thickly.

"You have no need of it," said the woman. "Stay where you are."

There was some quality in her voice that held him. The big, burly man seemed wholly dominated by that black-clad figure, with its curious, menacing poise, and the eyes that burned behind the veil. He stopped, and his hands fell to his sides.

"Why are you here?" he repeated dully.

She opened a cloth bag that hung to her belt by a little chain, and took from it a sheaf of legal papers.

"Do you see these?" she said in an even voice. "They are the deeds—the debts. The bonds that hold you."

His eyes listlessly followed the yellow fingers with the gleaming opal ring, that sorted the papers deftly in his sight. He did not understand. Madame Vampire placed them together, and, with a rapid movement of her wrist, tore the deeds across, and across again. She stepped to the fender, and tossed the papers into the fire. They caught immediately, and roared up the chimney in yellow flame. In a few seconds nothing remained but a little pile of smouldering ashes.

Haggard watched the creeping sparks with stupefaction. He turned to the woman, and, sinking into a chair, stared at her blankly.

"What does this mean!" he said.

"It means," said Madame Vampire quietly, "that you are free. You do not owe me anything."

She closed the black bag with a snap.

"You have done your utmost," she said. "I exact the utmost from every man—or woman—with whom I deal. I do not demand what is impossible."

For the first time, Haggard's nerve seemed to give way. The realisation of his freedom came home to him slowly.

"I—I suppose I should thank you," he said trembling, "I——"

"There is no need," replied the woman, cutting him short. "You have done your part. I do not count it failure. Your conduct of the defence was admirable. I expected an acquittal."

Haggard regained his voice.

"I had hopes, too," he said, with a sigh, "but slight ones. It was the lack of evidence that beat me. I was making bricks without straw. That is all but hopeless, in an English court."

Madame Vampire nodded.

"Hopeless," she repeated, "the whole thing was hopeless. But I absolve you, because your final address to the jury was a work of genius—it outlined the truth. The theory you gave them, that

Massingham was murdered to shield Craven, I believe to be the actual truth. It was not guess-work. But, in any other barrister's hands, it would have been laughed at. In yours, it all but saved Orme."

"I would have saved him," replied Haggard "had there been a jot of proof to back it."

"Yes," she said, almost under her breath. "And I failed you there. For my agents failed me. The proof could not be found."

Haggard looked at her, not understanding.

"I am going in a few moments," said the woman, "but first—though I have of my own free will abandoned all hold over you—I am going to ask you two or three questions, and I still require a service."

"Ask me anything you like," replied Haggard, who still looked dazed, as if he could not realise his escape. "I shall do all that you may require."

"Orme did not kill Herbert Massingham?"

"I believe," said the K.C., "and would say on my death-bed, that Orme had no more hand in it than I did. But I think that hardly a hundred men in England have any doubt, now, that it was Orme's work. A quarrel, and a murder. That's what the jury arrived at. I say no!"

"I want your own view. Who was the murderer?"

"Simon Linke. Or—Craven."

"It lies between those two," she said.

"Craven knows the truth about the murder, and it has saved him. If you want my final word on the case, it is this," said Haggard: "Orme is innocent, but the proofs of it died with Massingham. They will never be traced, because they do not now exist."

It was some time before Madame Vampire spoke again.

"There remains the service," she began quietly.

"If you are thinking of an appeal," said Haggard quickly, "I would not refuse to act for you. But I tell you, as this case stands, it will be quite useless."

"I know it," said the woman. "I have been into that. There would be less chance than there was the first time. I would not uselessly expose to that deadly strain—those whom I represent. No, all that remains at present, all that can be hoped for, is the reprieve from death sentence."

Haggard rose.

"As to that," he said, "you need not have the slightest fear. They will never hang a man with Orme's previous record in such a case as this. His life is not in danger, the sentence will be commuted to penal servitude."

"I am aware of that," said Madame Vampire, "but I want the reprieve to be absolutely assured, and, above all, I want it to arrive quickly. Influence will be set to work, and here is a matter in which you can give great help. I wish your weight and experience at the bar to be used whole-heartedly and at once, to set this thing moving, so that it may be announced without delay that Orme's life is safe."

"I understand," said Haggard, "and I promise to press that forward immediately with any power that is at my command." He paused. "You have my word."

Madame Vampire looked at him silently.

"That is all," she said. "Now I will go. You will accept, I suppose, the judgeship that has been offered you? You will do it credit. In a court of justice you show two great qualities, power and honesty, and you would be a loss to the country. Why not extend those qualities to your private life, Mr. Haggard? For the man or woman who lives two lives is a fool, and can only come to one end."

"You are right," said Haggard softly. "I shall do what you advise. You have made the better road possible to me, and I will follow it. I shall no longer play the fool."

She walked to the door, but before she reached it Haggard spoke again.

"Let me extend to you the same warning," he said.

There was such a curious inflection in his voice, that Madame Vampire turned again and faced him inquiringly.

"'*De te fabula*,'" quoted Haggard, looking at her. "Change the name, and of yourself is the story told. 'The man or the woman—who lives two lives——'"

"I do not understand you," said Madame Vampire slowly.

"Pardon me," said the K.C. quietly, "you understand me very well. You have an understanding that is not surpassed by any woman—or man either—with whom I ever came in contact. Accept my humble admiration—Madame Vampire—Mrs. Gordon, of Gordon's, Limited."

She moved quickly two steps nearer to him.

"You mean——?" she said.

"I mean," answered Haggard, "that you are Mrs. Enid Garth."

So tense and strained was the silence that followed, so dangerous the light in the eyes behind the veil, that Haggard felt his nerves pricking and tingling. He looked at the woman steadily, and

with concentrated interest. She remained as still as a statue, and after a considerable pause, her lips moved.

"How long," she said gently, "has this curious idea been in your head?"

"Not long," Haggard replied. "I have only been certain from the moment you destroyed those bonds. It is not an idea, it is plain fact. I *know* that you are Mrs. Garth."

Still she did not answer.

"How do I know?" pursued Haggard. "By deduction, and by reasoning. For a considerable time, I confess, you baffled me. Had you not come here, I should have been still in the dark. I admit that your deception has been masterly. I refused you as Mrs. Garth, something that you were determined upon. As Madame Vampire, you forced my hand. The true solution seemed so impossible that my mind rejected it. Now I see that it is fact.

"By one or two details, so trifling that I believe no one but myself would have observed them, you have given me the necessary clue to the riddle and filled in the case against yourself, while you have been in this room," added Haggard. "Till now you have deceived me, as you must have thrown dust in the eyes of hundreds. You are a wonder-

ful woman. What methods you have for concealing this amazing double personality, I do not know. This, however, is only detail—I could fill it all in for myself if I had a few data."

He leaned his large white hand on the table, and spoke with a new earnestness.

"Of one thing, be absolutely sure," he said, "your secret is safe with me. As safe as in your own hands. I have for you not only admiration, but a profound gratitude. You did me the honour to say, just now, that I was capable of great things. I know it, and will prove it.

"I was on the down grade, and slipping fast, through my own folly. Sooner or later, I must have fallen into the abyss. You goaded me to a supreme effort, and saved me. You saved my life, my self-respect, and have made me a free man. The world and a great career are still before me. Your method may have been cruel, but I think I needed it none the less.

"And so," concluded Haggard, "I asked you that question when you were leaving, for I recognised in you a kindred spirit. Do you realise the extreme peril of the rôle you are playing? It can come but to one end."

The woman listened; her lips curved in a queer little smile.

"You assume too much," she said, "but whatever rôle I play, I must play it—no matter what the end is. And I know that my secret is safe with you, be it what it may. But you see, I admit nothing."

"I know, at least, what your object is," he replied. "You are working now for the destruction and the bringing to justice of Sir Melmoth Craven. Certainly, you might have a worse motive."

"I will ask you one question in return," she said, "for I have a high opinion of your intelligence. Do you imagine that Sir Melmoth Craven has, or could have, the same knowledge as that to which you pretend?"

Haggard made a slight gesture of contempt.

"Never!" he said. "From what I have seen of you—unless you betrayed yourself by some sheer blunder, of which I think you incapable, he will never see what is skilfully concealed. Craven's cleverness, though intense of its kind, is only a low cunning and a gift for dodging and intrigue. He has not the highest type of brain, nor any great reasoning powers. But—in defeating him, I think you will destroy yourself."

"I shall count that as nothing in the balance," replied Madame Vampire gently. "I value my life, Mr. Vernon Haggard, less than you did yours

twenty minutes ago, provided the goal is reached. Good-night to you."

She flitted silently from the room. Haggard dropped into a chair, and covered his face with his hands.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FAITH OF MARGARET

THE sensation of the Orme trial, which had afforded such entertainment and so many pleasant thrills to the readers of newspapers, was two days old. Many people had already forgotten it; the press had discovered new interests in other directions. In the little boudoir at Berkeley Terrace, Margaret Garth lay in her mother's arms, looking like a stricken child.

"I do not understand," she whispered, brokenly. "The cruelty—the bitter cruelty of it all! What is life for, when this is all that it means? Cruelty," said the girl in passionate rebellion, "and nothing else!"

Mrs. Garth held her closer, and made no answer. The beautiful face, near to her own, was white and drawn with grief.

"Why should I live," whispered the girl, "when the man I love—my darling and my hero—is—is——?"

Her mother caught Margaret's trembling hands in her own.

"Dearest," she said, softly, and very earnestly, "I have told you that cannot ever happen—they will intercede for him. Even now, the news may have reached him. Can you not believe me, Margaret?"

Her daughter looked at her strangely.

"There are so many things we have believed, mother," she said, dully, "so many things we have hoped for vainly. I only know that I am here, free—while he sits in a cell," her voice rose, her speech became rapid and wild, she shook as with a fever, "a cell—a cell—a dark cell—under sentence!"

"Margaret—hush! My darling!"

"Sentence of—death!" gasped the girl. She seemed to be trying to free herself from the arms that held her. "My love! My own man—mine." Margaret became quite still again. "John Orme," she said quietly, "if they kill you, they kill me, too."

The pain in Mrs. Garth's eyes was infinite; pain and pity beyond all speech. It changed slowly, as the silence grew, to such a look of bitterness, to so deadly a threat, as even her enemies had never yet seen in Mrs. Garth's face. Margaret lay quiet

now, but her mother was trembling slightly. There was no sound but the slow ticking of the clock.

A vague noise in the street presently caused Mrs. Garth to raise her head and listen. Newsboys seldom lifted their voices in Berkeley Terrace. But it was so now. Releasing Margaret, her mother walked to the window and threw open the casement.

A paper-seller was passing along the opposite pavement below, calling aloud in a hoarse voice, mechanically. Before him was a poster with large, black letters.

"ORME REPRIEVED"

Margaret had already roused herself, and reached the window, as if with some instinct of what was to come. In another moment, the news was made known to her.

Such a miracle of relief and joy overpowered the girl, that for awhile the whole shadow seemed lifted, and Margaret was almost her old, happy self. She could not speak, as Mrs. Garth took her in her arms.

"My dearest," said her mother, softly, kissing her forehead. "All fear is past. Did I not promise you this? It was the truth, Margaret,

for good or ill. I shall never tell you anything but the truth."

"And I will never doubt," answered the girl quickly, and penitently; "I think the terror of it all had maddened me. He is safe!" she said with a sudden fierceness. "They cannot harm him now!"

One of the newspapers was quickly brought up, and Margaret, with devouring eyes, read the brief paragraph announcing that John Orme was graciously permitted to retain the life his Creator had given him. Again and yet again, the girl read it, with wet cheeks and a heart overflowing with thankfulness and joy. It was some time before her mind grasped what the alternative meant. The medal had its reverse side. And in the midst of her gratitude, the realisation came with a shock.

"Penal servitude?" she said. The ugly words dropped from her lips mechanically, as if without understanding.

With startling clearness there came back to her certain words of Orme's, spoken on the day when she had expressed pity at the sentence, even on the ruffian Ducros, and all that such loss of liberty must mean. "I would prefer death a hundred times!" Orme had said. And she agreed with him. What would such a fate mean, to Orme of all men?

The shadow returned, less bitter, but fully as tragic.

"Prison for life!" she said, drawing her breath in sharply as she turned to her mother. "He is innocent!"

"Innocent," said Mrs. Garth quickly, "but remember, his life is saved. The first step is made good. Have faith still, Margaret. I dare not promise it, but the day may come that will clear him, and I bid you hope!"

"Hope!" echoed Margaret, "if I did not hope, I could not live! I have hope, yes, and faith. What can we do?"

"I tell you this," said Mrs. Garth with fierce earnestness, "I shall work and strive henceforward to one end only, and that is that justice may be done. I will never rest while John Orme's name is not cleared. The task may be heavy, but there are means at my command. For your sake and all that life means to you, Margaret, I shall never accept defeat."

A tinge of colour came back to the girl's cheeks, and her breath drew faster. There was a moment's silence.

"Mother," she said, "will you not tell me more? Can I not help? There are times when I know—I feel—that something is hidden from me." A note

of intense pleading came into her voice. "Am I not your daughter, and won't you take me into your confidence?"

Mrs. Garth looked past her without answering, and saw her own face, strangely hard and drawn, in the mirror.

"There are questions that you may not ask, Margaret," she said, her voice sinking. "There are things that do not come into your life. You must trust me."

She turned suddenly to the girl, her lips trembling, and held out her arms with a wonderful appeal. In her eyes, there was love unutterable, and a veiled fear,

"Will you trust me, Margaret?" she said, in a whisper.

Margaret took one swift step and was in her mother's arms. As her head sank upon the broad bosom, she felt Mrs. Garth's heart throbbing as though it would burst.

"Mother!" she said passionately, "whom have I, but you? What should I be, if I did not trust you utterly!"

. . . . . .

Mr. Samuel Drave, confidential manager of Gordon's, Limited, had hitherto regarded his chief as a woman shorn of all emotion and all human

weaknesses. Never before had he seen her deeply stirred. He stood in front of her desk and bowed his head to the storm.

Madame Vampire tapped the desk with her yellow knuckles and emphasised every word with biting contempt.

"I refuse to accept failure," she said. "What I demand is success, and I shall exact it. I wish to hear neither your objections nor your excuses.

"It is to my interest that the innocence of this man, John Orme, shall be made manifest, in spite of his conviction for murder. The Law has declared him guilty. I say that he is innocent, and I will prove it.

"We shall devote the whole of our organisation, power, and money, and the genius of our best investigators, to that one end. To gain it, I will spend our last guinea, and strain even our most secret and dangerous methods of attack to the breaking-point. What I require is the truth—nothing else matters."

Mr. Drave bowed.

"I shall obey you," he said. "I, also, believe Orme is innocent. We have failed, till now, because the time was short, and all the cards were against us. Since these are your orders, I will see them carried out. It will be a task," he added,

"entailing great labour, expense, and some danger. The difficulties are now greatly increased. However, if Orme is innocent, we are helpless until we find the man who is guilty."

He paused.

"For my part, I consider we have but one vital clue. We must find the man whose thumb-print was upon the knife. The knife that killed Massingham. Even then it does not follow that he was the murderer."

"I will lay down for you the lines on which we are to attack," said Madame Vampire. "To begin with, there are the three men most intimately concerned. The first is Simon Linke.

"You will place Linke under the care of two of our selected men. Ensuring every possible secrecy, he is to be shadowed night and day. Every action of his, both before and after the crime, is to be traced and reported upon. I am convinced you will find he has been in debt, but is now free from it. Follow that carefully. Nothing that Linke does is to escape you. The thumb-mark on the dagger, however, is not Linke's. Nevertheless, you know his character, and we have our own methods for dealing with such as Linke." Her eyelids snapped menacingly. "Apply those methods, without mercy."

Drave nodded. His expression boded ill for Linke.

"Secondly," said Madame Vampire, "though first in actual importance, as I need not tell you, is Sir Melmoth Craven. I am not satisfied with the alibi he established. Though it convinced the judge and jury so thoroughly that it was not even questioned for lack of proof, yet there you will find the weak spot. Though you drag all Lancashire with a seine-net, I must have, sooner or later, a detailed report of Sir Melmoth's movements on the night of the first.

"Thirdly, we have Craven's servant, Arthur Sugden—a person of much more importance than has been assigned to him yet. I gave you instructions about him, three weeks ago." She looked keenly at Drave. "Why have I no further report of this man?"

Mr. Drave looked a little apprehensive.

"It has been extremely difficult," he answered. "Arthur Sugden is Sir Melmoth Craven's confidential valet. He appears to have no connections whatever, nor have I ever found so many obstacles for tracing a man's antecedents or his late history. I've given you several facts, madam, but with those I come, at present, to a deadlock."

"You are to understand," said Madame Vam-

pire, with grim emphasis, "that at all costs, I must have full information about this man, and his relations with Craven. It is already clear that Craven has a hold over him, apart from the conditions of his service, and our organisation must discover what it is."

"Only give us time, and we shall not fail," said Drave, confidently. "He will not escape us, and he is under continual observation. He is, of course, chauffeur to Craven as well as body-servant, and it was he who drove Sir Melmoth to Liverpool on the night when the murder occurred at Westington. It is impossible, however, to separate him from Craven, or to get any information from him personally. Yet when my net is drawn a little tighter, that difficulty will disappear."

"He drove Craven's car—and yet he gave you the slip," said Madame Vampire bitterly. "Do not forget that."

Mr. Drave was not one of those small souls who try to gloss over defeat.

"It is so," he said, "I regret it. The most reliable of all our helpers—one who rendered priceless service—was shadowing Craven at Westington. Yet he slipped up twice, if you are correct. You tell me the man Linke, who appeared in the trial, must once have visited Craven or been

visited by him. There is no such record. But Craven's hotel, the White Rose, has many entrances, and there should have been more than one watcher. I accept the blame.

"In the second instance, the day of the murder, Craven left Westington and was followed by our man, at a distance, on a fast motor-cycle. The night was foggy. He missed Craven's car, and lost touch with it altogether, until very late that night he found it had arrived in Liverpool. We are still at work, following your instructions, on that affair."

"You know my rule," said Mrs. Gordon, inexorably. "No one is allowed to fail me a second time. If a man can blunder, he blunders always at the most vital moment. Supplant that watcher. Give him no more work of importance. Place all operations in charge of James Vincent whom we know as C.10. And, finally, I want your own personal view as to Linke, Mr. Drave."

Drave hesitated.

"You have told me as much, or as little, as you think fit for me to know of your interest in this murder case," he said, "and I do not ask questions. At present, I consider Linke the most likely culprit—save only for the matter of that thumb-print on the knife, I am banking on Linke."

Madame Vampire reflected.

"Follow all the more actively these other two men, Craven and Sugden," she said. "And finally bear this in mind: at Gordon's, Limited, all other things are subordinated to the Orme case. We concentrate on it entirely. I hold you responsible, Drave. I shall be at your call, and you at mine, night and day."

"I have never failed you, yet," said Drave, as he left the room. Madame Vampire rose from her chair.

"And while the machinery of Gordon's moves," she said softly, "Garth's shall deal faithfully with Sir Melmoth Craven and his partners—those jugglers in finance. Craven believes in the power of money. When he attempts to parry my final blow, that weapon shall break in his hands."

CHAPTER XXIV

NUMBER 700 WEXMOOR

"THE rope," said Orme bitterly and aloud, "would have been better."

"Better!" answered the granite wall ironically.

There was a haunting echo in the cell at Wexmoor prison, that was Orme's only company. It was not often that he lifted his voice.

Six weeks had passed since he heard the Judge pronounce sentence at Westington. Orme, in the hideous livery of His Majesty's prisons allotted to malefactors, sat on the clamped-down bench and no longer raged against fate. It seemed to him that he had reached the furthermost limit of human suffering. For pain of the body, or the threat of death, he cared less than nothing.

The reprieve that had come so quickly, while still he lay at Westington, had been a light of relief in more ways than one. But it was short-lived. With the recurring faith of the innocent he had for awhile assured himself, again and again, that

such a travesty of justice could not stand for ever. He was not familiar with the grim fact that hundreds have lived and died in prison for the crimes of others, who walked the earth free and unchallenged.

Another marvel had happened which uplifted his heart and brought him a far more trenchant joy than the reprieve itself. A message that made the blood course in his veins.

He had been removed to the county gaol at Lancaster, and there a visitor was allowed to come to him; a young barrister, whom Orme knew slightly. It was not Haggard, but the junior who had acted with him at the trial. In the presence of the warder, this visitor conveyed, in a few brief words, a message that Orme understood very well. The meaning of it, tersely expressed, was that Mrs. Garth still fought for him and bade him hope—and that there was one other who lived only for the day that should bring him freedom.

The visitor himself hardly seemed to understand the message that he brought, and evidently conveyed it only by a set request. But Orme read its meaning swiftly and clearly. Mrs. Garth kept faith with him. That powerful arm, that steadfast loyalty, was still on his side. And Margaret,

though the gates of the gaol were between them, was still his to all eternity.

That message made the blood course in Orme's veins, and brought back the light of hope to his eyes. The splendour of it opened wide the walls of his cell, and bade him wake to life.

And then as the long weeks went by—weeks that might turn to years—came doubt, growing stronger and more bitter.

On the fifth week they moved him to Wexmoor, that pitiless citadel of granite set on the crown of the moorlands. Orme, with ten other outcasts of society, detrained at a little station which is the highest in England. A guard of Civil Guards with rifles was waiting.

High, bleak moorlands stretched as far as the eye could see, desolate and wild. Vaguely Orme wondered whether any man had ever escaped from bondage over those rolling wastes. The riflemen who guarded him seemed to supply a silent answer. No man had ever reached permanent freedom from Wexmoor, until death or the finish of his term released him.

The prison itself was a town—a veritable citadel of granite, with outer walls as high as the sides of a country church, enclosing acres of stone-paved yards, and blocks of huge, hideous buildings. The

newcomers were marched straight in under the stone archway, and half an hour later, Orme found himself in the receiving-room before the prison governor, Colonel Campbell, who looked at Orme curiously, and after a couple of brief questions, passed him on. Little was required of him the first day. His cell received him, and darkness, with its waking and sleeping visions, came mercifully.

For the first five days, Orme did not leave the prison precincts, and was employed on routine work in the yards. Though details affected him little, he found the place much more human than Blexton Gaol. The discipline was strict, but the rule of silence was not nearly so rigid as in most penal establishments. And it is, above all things, the forbidding of speech between the convicts, which breaks the spirit and brutalises the men. Orme found, to his surprise, that there were many occasions when a few words could be exchanged with a fellow-prisoner, without calling down a warder's wrath.

He found, too, that within forty-eight hours, all the convicts with whom he came in contact knew who he was, and the nature of the offence for which he was condemned.

"See him?" he heard a man murmur to a neigh-

bour, while cleaning out a workshop on the second day—"Orme—the V.C. bloke. 'Lection case—did in a chap up North. Lifer."

Orme flushed to his temples. The obvious respect in which many of the men held him was only more galling. Yet there was in Wexmoor something of the milk of human kindness for Orme. The warders did not bully him, nor, for that matter, did he give them any cause. He fell into the drab niche which awaited him, and was beyond reach of either kindness or persecution. He was Convict 700 Wexmoor.

On the sixth day, he was marched out with twenty other men under armed escort, and soon found himself engaged in hard field-labour on an open, peaty meadow a quarter of a mile from the prison.

Although herded and worked like a coolie, Orme tried to shut that fact from his mind; the open sky and the keen, moorland wind brought him a little solace. The work consisted in trenching the boggy meadow. He handled his spade deftly and with a curious, bitter energy. The keen-eyed guard on point duty, with rifle ready, fifty yards away, seemed to Orme the measure of his shame. That night, as he lay on the truckle bed in the narrow cell, the iron entered into his soul.

At last he knew the inner meaning of despair. The message of the Garths was no more than a mockery. What could they do for him? What could any living soul in the world do? The time had been short, but nothing so swiftly saps a man's soul as the life of the convict. Despair creeps into every cell with the coming of the night, and seldom departs with the dawn. Those who suffer the Law's penalty know that the mind is not only starved, but tortured.

"All that we know who lie in gaol
Is that the walls are strong,
And every day is like a year
A year whose days are long."

Orme went down into the Pit. And before him, ever recurring when the darkness had shut down upon his cell, was the vision of Margaret, that brought him, instead of happiness, a keener agony.

CHAPTER XXV

THE INVALUABLE SUGDEN

THAT distinguished baronet and statesman, Sir Melmoth Craven, looked decidedly the worse for wear. Neither the purity of politics nor the delightful ramifications of finance seemed to agree with him.

He sat in a huddled attitude on the safe in his front sitting-room, and peered savagely across at Culebra. His features were faded and deeply lined, his lips were knitted in a bitter yet defiant curve, and though it was but six weeks since the Westington trial, he looked six years older.

"Who was the historic ass," he said viciously, "that declared a great victory was the next worse thing to a great defeat? The great victory was mine. We bled Garth's of their money and saved ourselves—I won my place in Parliament—and Orme wears the broad arrow. Yet, was it victory after all? I find myself fighting harder than ever before—fighting a losing battle! I'm all in, Ruy.

A big crash would be better than this series of small defeats."

Culebra swore in his native tongue.

"For heaven's sake, don't take that line, Melmoth," he said, uneasily. "We have always looked on you as our backbone. I have strong nerves, and I'm not afraid as long as you stand by us. We've been in far greater danger before. Think of the situations you've pulled us out of."

"And where has it all led?" said Craven, brutally. "We thought ourselves solidly on our feet. Ample capital in hand, all going well; Orme down and out; wild-cat schemes discarded; safe solid operations in full swing. Things you would swear no enemy could upset. Yet they've failed and failed again. The coffers are emptying."

"It's the very devil," admitted Culebra. "Not a week passes but the markets fail us—every settlement day we find we have been quietly stabbed in the back. The safer we play, the more surely the trouble comes. We can neither foresee nor forestall it. Do you know what Steinberg advised?"

"I neither know nor care."

"He was for selling up and clearing out with everything we could raise."

"He is a fool," said Craven, shortly. "We cannot sell out; we are committed too deeply.

There is nothing for it but to fight on. Let him go; we shall be well rid of him."

Culebra dropped his cigar into the ash-tray.

"The truth is, Melmoth, that you underrated the power of Garth's. You thought you had beaten them—and for a time you did. The Ducros business was a master-stroke, but they have never for a moment relaxed vigilance, and it is clear to me that they have been the movers in every defeat we have suffered since."

Craven moved impatiently.

"Garth's have great resources, but it is incredible that they should always acquire the inside knowledge of our work, every time."

"Who is it, then? The mysterious Mrs. Gordon?" said Culebra.

"I am far more afraid of that she-devil than of all the Garths that ever came out of Cornhill," confessed Craven.

"Is there," said Culebra, dropping his hands on to his knees and peering at Craven, "no connection between the two?"

"It is an incredible thing," said Craven. "No man with brains in his head would believe in any alliance between Garth's Bank and that blood-sucking joint in Gresham Lane. How could such an affair be kept secret, and what could be the

object of it? I believe the Vampire woman is a blackmailer. But she has not the power in the market that Garth's hold."

"I can tell you, very concisely, what's wrong," said Culebra. "It's that accursed warning that Garth's evidently sent out, at the very beginning, so that all the other financial houses got up against us and turned us down. It's the devil of a thing to fight against. And they've followed it up—they've got a stranglehold on us."

"There's one thing worse—the greatest rock we've stumbled over," said Craven, bitterly—"the Orme trial! I was solid, till then. The law rid us of Orme—but at what a price!"

Culebra looked queerly at Sir Melmoth out of the corners of his eyes. Craven noticed it.

"By heaven!" he said, savagely, turning round. "If you look at me like that, Ruy, I think I'll strangle you! I won't stand it. That's the look I get everywhere. Nobody says a word. But men fight shy of me. I've a seat in the House—what good is it now? Even my own party treats me like a leper. And little twopenny men, whom I despise, affect to despise me. It's that infernal trial. What have I done to deserve it?"

"What, indeed?" echoed Culebra, soothingly, but with a wry little smile. "I am not particular,

Melmoth; I did not mean to jar your nerves by my expression. You imagined it. Undoubtedly the trial had a bad effect. You are about as popular as the amiable Mr. Linke. Haggard played the devil with you. It's not only the showing-up of our little corner in drugs, which is in all the papers now. But there were times during that trial when I was really frightened. Haggard, though he'd nothing to go on, is a terror."

"I wish he had a rope round his neck!" said Craven, furiously. "He would never have touched that case of his own free will. He was driven to it —the Gordon woman worked that, as you know."

"And so we come back," persisted Culebra, "to this strange connection between Garth's and Gordon's. The trial was a disaster for you, Melmoth—it has directed all sorts of vague suspicions against you, which no man can give tongue to, but which makes your election appear the queerest bit of work on record. There's the trail of the rope over it. You have never even told me what lay behind your movements that fatal night."

Craven ignored the question.

"You still feel perfectly safe?" insisted Culebra, suavely.

Craven turned to him with a dark face.

"Do you know, Ruy, that I am moving in a

mesh of espionage!" he said under his breath. "I cannot lay a finger on any of the agents, yet I feel and know that nothing I do, whether in the City or in the inmost privacy of my own house, escapes notice and report. It is so skilful that neither I nor Sugden can combat it or run it to earth. Sometimes," he added slowly, "I begin to doubt even Sugden."

"I should think you need have no fear on that score," said Culebra with a shrug. "That pearl among valets cannot afford to be doubted. You have too fast a hold on him."

"True," said Craven, moodily. "But if you were in my position, you would mistrust all men. We——"

A soft knock at the door interrupted him, it was opened, and the sleek, silent Sugden entered.

"This arrived at your house by the post, sir," he said, respectfully, handing a harmless-looking letter to Sir Melmoth, "and by the appearance—Have you any orders for me, sir?" he added, humbly, but suggestively. Craven understood that his servant had a message.

"What is it?" he said. The man hesitated. "Nothing very urgent, sir."

Culebra saw that the man wished to speak to Craven alone, and it annoyed him. On second

thoughts, however, he said good-bye to Sir Melmoth, and took his leave, even with some relief.

"Well?" said Craven, as soon as they were alone.

"I find, sir," said Sugden, "that investigations are being made at Westington—not by the police. Were it the police, I should have no misgivings."

"Westington is a closed chapter, Sugden," said Sir Melmoth.

"You have enemies, Sir Melmoth," said Sugden, softly, "whose interest it is to re-open that chapter. They are doing so. And very efficiently. Though you—" he corrected himself—"though I may think myself safe, it is never well to count on that. They are shadowing Linke, sir. Linke is always a weak spot."

Sir Melmoth swore.

"I have always been careful to keep clear of Linke," he said. "Since—the trouble."

"May I suggest to you, sir, that I go down and see?"

"No!" replied Craven, abruptly, "too dangerous. Best to keep away from it all. They will never discover anything that matters, and we can defy them."

"Pardon me, sir," persisted Sugden, respectfully, but very earnestly, "but I am certain it will

be more risky to let things slide than to act firmly. If you will allow me, I can do this thing with safety, and keep you informed. I think I should be on the spot."

"You are sure you can do it safely?" said Craven, after a long hesitation. His face was white and drawn.

"Absolutely, sir."

"Then go!" said Craven.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE QUEEN'S PAWN

MRS. GORDON, of Gordon's, Limited, sat at her desk in the red room, frowning thoughtfully over some papers that lay before her. Suddenly she rose, and opened the door of the inner room.

The veiled woman, her silent coadjutor, sat there in the little arm-chair, but for once she was not reading. She was staring vacantly in front of her, her appearance was strangely huddled and shrunken. Madame Vampire beckoned to her.

"You will take my place here till five o'clock," said Madame Vampire. "I shall then return, and will release you."

"I have a few words to say to you before you go," replied the woman. "My message is urgent; please hear it."

Madame Vampire bolted the outer door, seated herself, and motioned her subordinate to a chair.

"Tell me quickly, for time presses," she said. "What is it?"

"Before long," said the woman quietly, in the harsh, thin voice that was natural to her, and which Madame Vampire so accurately copied, "I shall have to leave your service. That is all."

Madame Vampire gazed at her, dumbfounded. Such a message was the last that she dreamed of hearing. It was incredible. The chief of Gordon's leaned forward, her eyes grew cold and stern.

"Are you in your senses?" she said.

"I am telling you what is true," replied the woman. "My work for you, simple as it is, draws to an end."

At no time, in all her career, would the withdrawal of that silent, faithful double have been so disastrous to Madame Vampire as then. She had never considered such a thing possible.

"There is but one answer to that," said Madame Vampire grimly. "Remember by what ties you are bound. I have never reminded you of them—do not force me to do so now. Now, of all times, I cannot let you fail me. You will remain; you will serve me, and carry out my orders. I will not listen to this warning—consider it unsaid."

"Unfortunately," said the woman, wistfully, "it is taken out of your hands. Neither you nor I have the choice."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said the woman, simply, "that I am dying."

Madame Vampire started, and caught her breath. The woman continued calmly.

"Do you remember, a day or two ago, I told you that I should see a doctor—about some trifling matter, I said. I always tell you such things, in case they might affect you. Well, I knew that it was not trifling. I saw the man whose name I mentioned to you—a great specialist. And he read me my death sentence. Shorn of all the words that these men use, it is heart trouble, well advanced, and beyond cure. I have long suspected it, and so far from terrifying me, it is very welcome news. Briefly, I can hardly live a year—perhaps a few months—perhaps days only. It is right that you should know, for it affects you even more than me. And so I give you this warning, that you may be prepared."

The hardness died from Madame Vampire's face. She caught the woman's yellow hands in hers, with a little sob of pity.

"My poor Sofia!" she said gently. "I never dreamed of this. But it is terrible. Had I known——"

"Do not blame yourself," said the woman, quietly. "How is it any fault of yours? It was

foreordained. What! Did you think for a moment that I would fail you for any other cause? You, to whom I owe so much?"

"Little enough," said Madame Vampire, with a shiver.

"Enough for me. See," said the woman eagerly, "you know my story only too well. I have sinned greatly, and greatly I have been punished. The world had no place for me. I was shunned by my fellow-creatures—an outcast. For that I cared little; it was my penalty."

"You are one of many," said Madame Vampire.

"Ah!" said the woman, "but through you alone, I have known peace. All these years, I have served you without question. You required little of me. What you do, or why, I never cared to know. The house in City Wall has been my refuge; there I found comfort and ease. To make the daily journey here, to take your place, to obey your orders—all this suited me well."

Madame Vampire nodded.

"Nor should I have dared to do otherwise," said the woman; "but you have never held a threat over me. There was no need. I think you are the only creature that has ever been kind to me. For you have been kind—in your way. There has been money; more than I needed. My holiday

every year; the little cottage by the river in Devon, where I could be alone. All you have asked of me, is silence and obedience."

She sat back and looked at her patron.

"I know you as Mrs. Gordon, of Gordon's, Limited. You might be a murderess, for all I care. But for the little I do, you can count on my loyalty to the end, no matter what betide. I only pray that I may not fail you."

"But you cannot go on like this—now," said Madame Vampire, slowly. "It is impossible!"

"Certainly I can!" said the woman, quickly. "I do not suffer—or very little. I am as well here, doing what I do, as anywhere. I will not go unless you order me. When the end comes, it will be swift; they told me that much. And I do not think it may be so soon. But it was my duty to give you this warning, and for you to judge."

For some moments, Madame Vampire sat silent.

"Then," she said quietly, "since you are willing, it shall be as you say. I will take the risk. I seldom speak to you of affairs, but hear me now. I should not dare say it, but you are near your end, and it may be some comfort. I am working for the lives and the happiness of people who are not

even a name to you. I am fighting to right a great wrong, and to undo an unspeakable cruelty. By obeying me, even when so near death, you will have your share in that."

"That is good hearing," said the veiled woman. "Let me do a little good, then, before I die."

Madame Vampire placed a hand on the shoulder of her assistant.

"You are a brave woman," she said. "Well, I take you at your word. It will be less dangerous for me to run the risk of losing you, than to make a change at this stage. It is a terrible decision to make, and I have a sympathy and pity for you that I cannot put into words."

"Do not waste them on me," said the woman with a slight smile. "Perhaps I am happier than you."

"That may well be," said Madame Vampire, quietly. "Give me, now, a few minutes to myself. There is something I have to do."

The woman retired. Madame Vampire sat for some time, thinking, and finally took from a locked drawer a sheet of paper written in a clear legal hand. It bore a heading in black letters.

"The last Will and Testament of Sofia Gordon."

Madame Vampire read it through carefully and with deep thought. She considered the signatures of the witnesses at the bottom.

"It will still serve," she said to herself. "There was always the chance, which had to be guarded against. I shall make no alteration. When this will has been executed—there shall be no more Gordon's, Limited. Meanwhile the danger is a terrible one, and I can do nothing to counter it. I am in the hands of fate."

She enclosed the will in a long envelope, put it in the black bag at her waist, and called up her manager. He appeared promptly, looking decidedly pleased with himself. A glance at his chief's face, however, damped his spirits very effectively.

"Reports from Westington," said Mr. Drave, placing a sheaf of typed papers before Madame Vampire. "I think, madam, we shall soon earth our fox."

She took the papers eagerly, and leaning forward over the desk, perused them with keen attention. As a record of keen and subtle investigation work, they were a marvel. From time to time, the eyes behind the veil lit up, only to fade again. At the end she sat back, disappointed.

"Vincent has done well," she said to Drave, "but the points, man—the two main points that we need! They still elude him. Where are the proofs I asked for?"

"The difficulties are enormous, as you see," replied Drave, "but our men are on the scent, though it is still faint, and I am convinced we shall get those proofs at last."

Madame Vampire rose swiftly to her feet.

"At last?" she cried harshly, "but when? Six weeks have gone by, and yet the real vital progress we have made is small. I must have speed—speed! Send a message to Vincent that the watchword is speed—at all costs. I am fighting against time!"

Mr. Drave withdrew hurriedly, marvelling. Never before had he known his chief press for speed, in a delicate and dangerous operation. She had always been slow, certain, and inexorable. His belief in an early success was far slighter than hers.

. . . . . .

Eleven days later, Madame Vampire entered the office by way of the inner room, and seating herself at the desk, bowed her head upon her hands.

"Is there no hope?" she muttered. "Am I beaten in the end? This suspense is killing Margaret. It is killing her before my eyes! I know what the strain is. I am at work, day and night, while she has nothing to do but brood, and think, and doubt.

She is losing faith. Heaven help me! Sometimes I lose it myself. Has the luck turned against me? Are the powers of evil too strong?"

She bent to the speaking-tube listlessly, and summoned her partner. Then she sat back, in an attitude of utter dejection, and closed her eyes.

Mr. Drave, however, answered that summons more swiftly than ever before in his life. Though excitement was foreign to him, the sounds from the stairway suggested that he was coming up three steps at a time. He flung open the office door, closed it quickly, and flung a pile of typescript on the desk before his chief.

"Success!" he said, striking the papers with his hand, "success, complete—absolute—final. We hold Massingham's murderer in the hollow of our hands!"

The woman stretched out her yellow fingers and drew the sheaf of typescript towards her, turning over the pages rapidly. Her eyes lit with a smouldering fire.

"I have waited, oh so long—for this," she said swiftly. "Has my hour come at last!"

Drave pointed to the first heading with an eager finger.

"Here," said Drave, "is the true history of the Massingham murder. It is a triumph for you,

madam, such as you have never equalled. Throughout, the clues have been followed on the lines you laid down for us. These threads of evidence here fasten the guilt where it belongs.

"They have been drawn up in masterly fashion by James Vincent (whom we know as C.10). He instances the three chief actors in that ugly drama of the Massingham tragedy, and separates the truth from the falsehood."

There was nothing dramatic about the neat typed documents in Madame Vampire's hands. They were as brief and clear as an engineer's indent form.

C. 10's Report

New Evidence on the Massingham Case

No. 1.—Simon Linke

Statements

This man swore at the trial that he had never received a bribe. That he paid Orme's voters with Orme's money. That Massingham told him Orme was guilty of bribery.

Facts

Three days *before* the murder, Linke privately paid a debt of £250 to Amos Cohn, money-lender, of Woldham.

Two days *after* the murder, Linke asked Cohn

to keep this transaction secret, and paid him £30 for his silence. Linke feared exposure.

By pressure through Gordon's, I have obliged this money-lender to disclose this transaction to me, and I enclose his statement.

I have also obtained two of the bank-notes paid to him by Linke, and have now traced these as having been issued, originally, through Sir Melmoth Craven's account at the Provincial and Counties Bank, with one of whose cashiers I am in touch.

It therefore follows:

That Linke received a bribe of over £200 from Sir Melmoth Craven, prior to the election.

That the whole of Linke's testimony at the trial was false.

These facts, which were cleverly concealed, I have elicited at heavy expense and after long researches.

No. 2.—Sir Melmoth Craven

Statements

This witness swore at the trial that he had had no transactions with Linke. That Massingham's letter, which Craven read and destroyed in his motor-car, accused Orme of bribery. That Craven's car on the night of the murder was driven direct from Westington to Liverpool, average speed being somewhat low on account of engine trouble.

Facts

Sir Melmoth Craven's car, a dark-red Burnett-Bruce landaulette, left Westington at 7.15 for Liverpool by the Fordham road, on the night of the murder.

At about 7.40 or earlier, Sir Melmoth Craven's car turned off the main road and travelled back to Westington at very high speed by way of the less-frequented Milcoates road. Slowing on account of fog, it entered Westington by the southern suburbs, and at three minutes to eight was halted close to the yard-gates of Butts' Brewery.

Butts' Brewery is within three hundred yards of the back of the Bell Hotel, where the murder took place.

Between 8 and 8.15, the car once more left Westington, and when clear of the fog, continued at great speed towards Liverpool, avoiding Fordham altogether. Arrived Liverpool, 10.15.

It therefore follows:

That Sir Melmoth Craven and his chauffeur-valet, Arthur Sugden, were in Westington, and close to the Bell Hotel, at the time the murder was committed—between 8 and 8.10.

I invite attention to my evidence regarding the above. Had Sir Melmoth Craven's car proceeded as he stated, it must have passed through Fordham some time after 7.50. I append the signed statements of two watchmen on the drainage-works where the main road was up, just outside Fordham,

that no car of any sort passed them between the times mentioned.

I append the signed statements of five witnesses, who on the night of the murder saw a large, red closed car at the following times and places.

(1) Travelling *toward* Westington, time about a quarter to eight. (2) *Entering* Westington, about five minutes to eight. (3) *Stationary* near Butts' Brewery (thick fog) soon after town hall clock struck eight. (4) Five miles south of Westington, travelling at great speed south-west (towards Liverpool).

None of these witnesses (whom I have hunted out after long and patient research) attached any importance to having seen this red closed car, or had any suspicion that it could bear in any way on the Massingham murder case. Consequently none of them ever communicated with the police —who, like the public, appeared to concentrate all interest on John Orme.

The movements of Sir Melmoth Craven and his car, as given above, form the key to the problem.

No. 3.—Arthur Sugden

Not called at the trial

This man, whose identity and antecedents have been very difficult to trace, I now find to be Walter Stephens, son of a Hampshire gamekeeper. Was four years a gentleman's servant in London. Emi-

grated to Wyoming ('96). Two years in Sing Sing Prison ('98). Not known to English Police, and U. S. Police have lost all trace of him. He was concerned in the train robbery on the La Paz Railway, Argentine, 1902, when two train officials were shot. He got away to Paraguay.

Is now valet to Sir Melmoth Craven who brought him from Caragua, and who certainly knows his record and has a hold over him. Sugden is an extremely clever man of his type, and a dangerous criminal.

Summary

From the above evidence, which is fully supported, the following deductions are clear, and can be proved.

1. Sir Melmoth Craven bribed Linke to unseat Orme, without Massingham's knowledge.

2. Sir Melmoth Craven committed flat perjury when he declared that he drove direct to Liverpool on the night of the 1st.

3. Sir Melmoth Craven opened, in his car, a letter from Massingham, which determined him at all costs to prevent a meeting between Massingham and Orme. That such a meeting was possible he must certainly have known, for he drove back with all speed to Westington.

4. His car was waiting close to the Bell Hotel at the time the murder was committed. There are three entrances to the Bell Hotel. The accident of a thick fog made it easy to enter or leave the

hotel unseen. The fog, and possession of a fast car, enabled Craven to establish an alibi.

5. The exposure of Craven's bribery of Linke would have meant certain ruin for Craven. Linke lied throughout in support of Craven.

6. Orme's testimony, that he arrived in his room and found Massingham dead, or dying, is true.

7. Sugden, known to be a criminal, or Sir Melmoth, his master, encountered Massingham, and left before Orme arrived. They drove with all possible haste to Liverpool. Orme's advent, at such a fatal moment, and his consequent arrest, saved them.

C. 10.

Madame Vampire laid down the papers and sat back in her chair. Drave was about to speak—she held up her hand for silence. For some minutes she remained motionless, thinking rapidly.

"Good," she said quietly. "Very good indeed. And—Haggard was right. It is a triumph."

"It must establish Orme's innocence," said Drave. "I see but one flaw in it." He pointed to paragraph 7 of the Summary. "Craven's car was on the spot, with but one block of houses between it and the place where the crime was committed. And there we have a gap. Which of these two men entered the Bell Hotel—Sugden or Craven? And where is the direct proof of that?"

Madame Vampire smiled grimly.

"You call that a flaw?" she said. "I see no difficulty there."

Drave shook his head.

"I agree that we have a strong chain of evidence," he said, "and that it will soon be complete, I am certain. But, madam, do you think that on this evidence, as it stands, the police will move against Craven?"

"They might do so, if they were pressed," she answered, "but reluctantly, and with caution. So slowly, too, that perhaps Craven could slip through their fingers. There is, indeed, the one clue missing. If that were in our hands, the chain would be so strong that they would move instantly—swiftly!"

A quick flash of comprehension came into Drave's eyes.

"I know what you mean!" he said. "Yes, the last link in the chain. We know where to seek it now. It can only be one of two. But—by whom is it to be proved, and tested?"

"By me!" said Madame Vampire. She rose to her feet. "I will deal with Sir Melmoth Craven. You hear me, Drave? No other than I must do this thing. I reserve that for myself."

Drave inclined his head. Never had her voice been so imperious as now.

"I must devise a means, then, for bringing him in touch with you," he said.

"It is very simple," replied Madame Vampire. "I will summon him to attend."

She took a slip of paper and wrote rapidly.

"He may refuse," said Drave.

"Let him refuse," said Madame Vampire, and again the grim smile twisted her lip. "In that case he will be brought to me. I know what I am doing. The time, seven o'clock; the place, Strond Street—not here." She gave the slip of paper to Drave. "Type that, and have it delivered at once. It is my order."

Drave bowed, and went out.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FINAL SUMMONS

SIR MELMOTH CRAVEN, after toying thoughtfully with the stopper of the decanter for a few moments, mixed himself a stiff peg and absorbed it slowly. He lit a cigar, and lay back in his chair with his feet to the fire.

Sir Melmoth was feeling more comfortable both in mind and body. Things were going decidedly better. He had had a successful day's racing, and a financial operation was in progress which even the Garths were wholly unable to reach.

The vague fears that had oppressed him a week or two ago were dissolving. There had evidently been no ground for them. Sir Melmoth was in a mood to defy the world. The only drawback he felt was the loss of his valet, who was at Westington on a second and somewhat prolonged absence.

There came a tentative knock at the front door of the flat.

Sir Melmoth himself went to the door. He took

no meals at the flat, and there was no staff there at night time. He glanced through the letter box, and opened the door. A man stood on the mat, clad in a heavy dark overcoat and a soft hat. It was Sugden.

"Thank you, sir," said the valet humbly, as he stepped in.

"Come to me directly you have your things off," said Craven with some eagerness.

A few minutes later, Sugden joined his master in the front room. The man's sharp face looked drawn and weary, there were black lines under his eyes, he looked restless and anxious.

"I have just got back from Westington, sir," he said.

"You have been very careful, I hope? It was a risky business, but it had become absolutely necessary, Sugden, to know how we stand."

"I took the greatest possible precautions, sir."

"And the result?"

"I fear, Sir Melmoth, there is very serious danger," said the man gravely. "There are three, if not more, secret investigators at work, searching the country as if with a fine-tooth comb, for evidence on the Massingham business. They are more dangerous than a dozen detectives; they never rest, and seem to have unlimited money.

They are far too clever and too secretive to let any one outside get into touch with their work. But I have found——"

"Yes, what?" said Craven eagerly.

"—That they are trying to trace the movements of our car—your car, sir—on the night I drove you from Westington to Liverpool. The night—" Sugden lowered his gaze to the carpet and spoke little above a whisper "—when Massingham met his death. It was sworn, at the trial, that we drove there direct. But that is the first weak spot, sir, as you know. These people are trying to get different evidence."

"They cannot get it! That business is finished," said Craven sharply.

"I hope not, sir. There is another danger, and that is Linke."

"Simon Linke? What of him?"

"He is being shadowed, watched, questioned. Day and night, they are after him. The wretched creature is nearly mad. It's a form of torture, perfectly pitiless. Of course, he dare not complain to any one. He——"

"Curse all cowards!" growled Craven uneasily, "why did not the fool clear out, long ago?"

"He did. He has been to many places, and is now at Woldham. But if he went to China, I be-

lieve he would not escape them. He is terrified. And one thing I feel certain of—if proofs are obtained against me, or you, and the case is reopened, Linke knows he would be arrested, and he will turn King's evidence at once."

"If!" snapped Sir Melmoth. "That is the one thing I know cannot happen. Let them nose, and ferret—and dig—they cannot get such proofs. There lies safety."

"I wish I felt as sure, sir."

"Deuce take it, man, you look frightened, yourself. You, of all men!" said Craven, looking at him anxiously.

"You will remember, sir, that if I am right, my danger is a very grave one."

Sir Melmoth dropped into the chair, and bit his nails.

"Frankly, sir," said Sugden, "I am not, as you know, a scaremonger, but things look so bad to me, so desperately bad, indeed, that I am sure we should be well advised to get out of this country while the way is clear. We may be safe as you say. But I believe at any moment, the blow may fall, and then it will be too late."

"I shall not go. I cannot go!" said Craven, harshly. "Whatever happens, I remain."

"In that case, sir, of course I shall stand by you

in all events," answered Sugden. "Not because I wish to," he added inwardly, "but because I have no choice." An ugly look came into his face.

"There is no doubt, of course, who pays these men?" said Craven bitterly. "It is not Garth's?"

"They are in the employ of Gordon's, sir, beyond question. I know it, even if I cannot prove it."

Sir Melmoth swore furiously.

"That accursed woman! Even now, after all these encounters, I cannot be certain what it is she is trying to do. Is it only my ruin she is working for? Is it blackmail—or something far worse? The devil take her! She will not beat me—I've got a way to encounter her. Let her look to herself. I defy her!"

There was a pause. Sugden said nothing. A faint noise, a scratch or a rustle, was heard at the outer door.

"What's that?" said Craven, starting.

The valet looked into the passage. He went swiftly to the front door and flung it open. No one was there; the staircase was quiet and empty. But in the letter-box was a yellow envelope, that had certainly not been there when he came in. He took it to Craven.

"For you, sir."

Sir Melmoth tore it open. The letter was typed.

"Madame Vampire requires your presence at Number 145A, Strond Street, Borough, at 7 P. M. See that you do not fail to appear."

Sir Melmoth gave vent to a stifled oath. His hands shook as he read the paper. He flung it across to Sugden.

"I will not go!" he said, thickly. "She chose to warn me, long ago, to come to her if she called. Well, I choose to refuse! Let her do what she will!"

His face was white and pulpy. There was less defiance than fear in his eyes.

"Strond Street?" said Sugden. "Borough? That is not their place of business. And—she has never signed herself Madame Vampire before. Strange. Yet it must be hers."

He examined the paper carefully, reading it again.

"If I might suggest, sir," he said seriously, "I feel it would be very unwise to ignore this. Very unwise."

"I will not go, I say!" returned Craven. "Nothing will induce me to go! That is final. Let me have the car at eight. I—I shall go to the Savoy."

"Pardon me, sir," said Sugden, softly, "but

this should be seen to at all costs. Will you allow me to go?"

"You?" said Sir Melmoth, glancing at him. "Would you go?"

"I shall be safe enough, sir, and I am ready to go. I am certain it is less dangerous to do so, than to let this slide."

"Certainly, Sugden," said Sir Melmoth, eagerly; "go by all means!"

"She may be well guarded," said Sugden. A cunning and dangerous look crept into his eyes. "And she may think herself very safe. But—I have ways of taking care of myself. Should the case prove desperate, sir, I may have to take—measures."

"You have a free hand!" returned Craven quickly.

Sugden put on his hat and coat quietly, and left the flat. Sir Melmoth drew a quivering breath of relief, and switching off the light, locked the front door and huddled himself in the chair by the fire.

. . . . . .

Forty minutes later, Arthur Sugden emerged from the Borough tube station and made his way along Great Dover Street.

Without desiring to attract any sympathy for a thorough and finished rascal, one thing may be

said for Sugden. He showed more stamina than his master, who, at that moment, was skulking in an arm-chair in Prince's Gate. He walked to his destination calmly and with a readiness to face all consequences. In spite of his experience, he believed himself able to cope with Madame Vampire.

Of one thing he was convinced—it would be more fatal to ignore the summons than to obey it.

What or where was the house in Strond Street, he did not know, nor very much care. It was, without doubt, some tenement or rendezvous belonging to Gordon's, who had their own reasons for making an appointment there and not at their offices. Whatever the place might hold in store for him, he decidedly preferred it to a police station. Sugden had been accustomed all through life to rely on himself, and a police station is the one place where this cannot usefully be done.

Strond Street he found to be an obscure and narrow thoroughfare of somewhat squalid houses, well away from the main arteries of the Borough. There was nothing to distinguish it from a hundred other such streets south of the river.

Number 145A, when reached, turned out to be at the end of a narrow alley or recess that ran back fifty yards from the main line of buildings. Sugden missed it at first, turned back, passed up

the alley, and stopped at the door, over which was the required number. He knocked, received no answer, turned the handle, and found the door unlocked, opening upon a musty passage, with a single inner door beyond.

Sugden hesitated. Then, with set teeth and watchful eyes, his right hand clenched inside the pocket of his coat, he moved quietly along the passage and rapped at the inner door. It swung open immediately.

Sugden scarcely knew what he had expected to see. He was certainly not prepared for the scene that met him.

The room was wide and very low, lit by two flaring gas-jets. Near the door stood a small table, and at the table, facing him, sat Madame Vampire. A whitewashed beam stretched across the room behind her, and from it, about six feet apart, dangled two iron staples.

Sugden had seen Madame Vampire before—in the streets, between Cornhill and London Wall. He had thought of her ever since as a bent, shabby old woman in black. But there was something so menacing and sinister in the silent figure that faced him now, that a shiver ran through him, and he stopped dead.

The woman was not alone. On either side of

the door stood a silent attendant. And one of these, a tall, sinewy, swarthy man, of very un-English appearance, moved quickly to Sugden's side, and stood there, motionless.

The door swung to behind Sugden. He hesitated. The woman in black stared at the intruder with steady, unblinking eyes.

"I did not send for you, Walter Stephens," she said softly.

That simple sentence had a peculiar effect on Sugden. His face turned an ashen, sickly grey, and his jaw dropped. His eyes shone with fear. The hand inside his jacket pocket made a slight movement.

Instantly the sinewy arm of the man at his side was flung round him, pinning both Sugden's arms close to his body. He was held in a grip of steel. His swarthy captor, holding him fast, thrust a hand into the side pocket and tore from Sugden's grasp a small, flat Mauser pistol. This he held out to the other attendant, who came forward and took it from him without a word.

Still keeping Sugden in a close embrace, almost without effort, the dark-skinned man passed one hand over him with loving care, searching for any other hidden weapon that Sugden might have about him. He found none. There was no

struggle. All resistance seemed to have gone out of Sugden—he remained limp and inert, his face was ghastly. The man released him gently.

"That is better," said Madame Vampire; "stand back from him a little, Perez."

The two attendants placed themselves behind Sugden and stood motionless. He remained as still as they, save for a slight trembling of the hands. Madame Vampire placed her elbows on the table, rested her chin on her palms, and regarded him thoughtfully.

"Mr. Walter Stephens, of the Argentine and Caragua," she said, "it was your master I summoned, not you."

Sugden did not answer. He stared at her with an unholy fascination.

"He is apparently afraid to come. So he sends you in his place. I thank Sir Melmoth Craven," said Madame Vampire gently. "But I am not here to do the work of the Argentine police. However, since you have come, you will obey me."

She opened a little cloth bound booklet of a dozen leaves, on the desk before her, studied it a few minutes, and again scrutinised Sugden's face.

"You have altered somewhat since you were photographed at Sing Sing," she said. "But not more than the passage of time accounts for."

The man gave a gulp, and nodded.

There was a telephone installation on a rough shelf at the side of the room; it looked curiously out of place in that bare and dingy apartment. Madame Vampire walked across to it. She spoke to the two attendants, and they brought Sugden to the instrument. He came meekly.

She took down the receiver, called the Exchange, and gave Craven's number. Then she handed the receiver to Sugden.

"When your master answers," she said, "give your name. You will then repeat the following message:

"'Mrs. Gordon regrets that you do not see your way to granting her the interview she has requested. She hopes, however, that you will visit her later!' "

Sugden put the receiver to his ear. Madame Vampire watched him carefully. There was a buzz from the instrument, and he spoke.

"It's me, sir—Sugden. I have a message from Mrs. Gordon." He repeated it accurately, word for word.

As he did so, Madame Vampire took the receiver from his hand. Sir Melmoth's reply, thick and slurred, sounded in her ear.

"Tell her to go to the devil!" it said.

"Perez," she said in English. "You will accompany this man from here to the garage, where his car is. Until he returns here, according to the orders you have heard me give him, he is in your charge."

The man bowed gravely.

"Should he at any time attempt to interfere, to disobey, or to escape, you will secure him at all costs and hand him over to the nearest constable on a charge of robbery. Accompanying him to the police-station you will, in the name of Gordon's, Limited, prefer the charge against him of being concerned in the La Paz train robbery in '98, for which the Argentine Police have a warrant out against him. You will hand to the Chief Inspector these papers and this identity book, which will be amply sufficient, and leave the rest to me."

"I understand perfectly, señora," said the man.

"You will, however, have no trouble whatever," continued Madame Vampire, "for he quite comprehends his position. He will not attempt to escape. At the garage, you will take your place inside the car, sitting well back. Disconnect the inside lamp, so that it cannot be turned on. On arriving at Sir Melmoth Craven's house, neither of you will move from your places. You will wait till Sir Melmoth comes down. He may very pos-

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LAST LINK IN THE CHAIN

SIR MELMOTH CRAVEN stepped out of his dressing-room, drawing an orchid into the buttonhole of his admirably cut evening coat. And though there was nobody to hear him, he laughed aloud.

"Madame Vampire regrets!" he said, chuckling. "She hopes to see me later. Dev'lish funny!"

He laughed again. Sir Melmoth swayed very slightly, and his eye watered and sparkled. There was amused defiance in his laugh.

The courage born of ardent waters is not a very high form of courage, and is apt to dull the intelligence. What it chiefly induces is recklessness of consequences—a useful frame of mind in some situations, but decidedly dangerous in others.

Not that Sir Melmoth was seriously the worse for his frequent applications to the decanter on the table. No man living had ever seen him over-

the shadows, stepped forward and quickly opened it for him, touching his cap. Sir Melmoth got in.

"Hullo!" he gasped, starting back. "What——"

Two hands seized his wrists with an iron grip, and jerked him forward on to the seat. The door slammed and the car shot forward.

"Stop!" shouted Craven, struggling savagely, "Stop!"

His voice died out in a gasp of pain. With a skilful grip, the man who held him had drawn one of Craven's wrists across his own forearm, and kept it there with a deadly, effortless pressure. It is one of the simplest holds known, and Craven found himself helpless as a child.

"You had best go quietly, Sir Melmoth," said his captor.

A sudden fit of trembling seized Craven.

"What do you want, curse you!" he gasped, panic-stricken. "What do you mean by this? Where's your warrant! Where's your warrant, I say?"

"I will show you my warrant soon," said his guardian, calmly. "Sit quiet like that, or you will be hurt—and that is unnecessary."

The soft, foreign intonation in the man's voice —the Spanish-American accent which, of all others, was most familiar to him—struck an in-

swiftly overpowered. The world became a blank to him.

. . . . . .

Sir Melmoth Craven opened his eyes slowly, and found himself in unfamiliar surroundings. His brain was swimming.

The light was dim—so dim that two gas-jets, both turned to a mere spot of flame, hardly made it possible to see anything. He was sitting limply in a broken chair. The room was very low and wide; an old beam ran across it, scarcely six feet from the floor.

Opposite him, just visible in the gloom, silent and apparently alone, was a dark figure seated at a table. As his faculties returned by degrees, Craven recognised that sinister outline, and knew with whom he had to deal.

"You!" he said with sinking heart, and stirred in his chair. His limbs felt like lead. "Well—what do you want with me?"

"The settlements of debts which you have evaded too long," said the woman in her thin, harsh voice. "One is now paid. We will proceed with the balance of the account. Is your head clear enough to understand me?"

"I understand one thing!" he said hoarsely. "Here in the heart of London, you have had me

"Let me go!" he gasped. "What devil's trap is this I have been led into? If ever I wronged a woman, it was not you! It was one who set you upon me, and who dare not show her face!"

Madame Vampire's eyes flashed, and she laughed harshly.

"Dare not!" she said, "but I think you are wrong! And your demand is just. It is well that you should meet your chief creditor. Wait, then, Sir Melmoth."

She walked quietly from the room. Craven was silent a little while; then in a frenzy, he tugged at his bonds and yelled for help. Again and again the thick walls threw back a muffled echo that mocked him. At last he became quiet. The minutes sped by; they passed to him like hours. Finally a light footstep was heard in the passage. Could it be a rescuer?

The door opened, and a tall, erect figure entered. Craven saw it move quietly to the gas-jets on either wall, which were turned on with a sudden glare of light. Then the woman stepped before him.

It was Mrs. Enid Garth.

Her face was unveiled—white, proud, and handsome, with inexorable eyes that looked steadily into his. She was dressed in dove grey, with a

and curve, every whorl of the central circles, agreed exactly. It was Sir Melmoth's sign-manual that showed, faint yet unmistakable, on the dagger.

Mrs. Garth looked at him slowly. Craven was silent. His face was white and rigid as marble, his eyes fixed in a ghastly stare.

"This, Sir Melmoth, is the last link in the chain," she said quietly. "The link without which you might yet have defeated the gallows.

"Here is a print of the dagger with which you killed Massingham. Massingham, whom you found waiting to betray to Orme, as his duty was, the infamy of which you had been guilty at Westington. Massingham was above a bribe. To save yourself from ruin and exposure, you killed him, and destroyed, so you thought, all the proofs.

"You left your victim dying. You left an honest man to bear the guilt of your crime, and a woman to break her heart for him. You backed your safety with a web of lies and perjury, aided by that luck with which, for a time, the Devil often supports his children. And now your time has come to pay in full."

Craven made no answer.

"Here are bank-notes, traced through your a/ count, which you paid to Simon Linke. Here the signed testimony of witnesses, proving th

CHAPTER XXIX

THE WARRANT

"It's a devil of a case, Shelton," said the Commissioner of Police, wrinkling his forehead over the papers before him. "It has no equal in my experience." He glanced up at the chief of the Criminal Investigation Department, who sat opposite him. "What do *you* make of those documents?"

"My opinion, sir, is that we've no choice but to act on them," said the chief of the C.I.D. "These Westington witnesses must be looked up and examined; if their testimony is genuine, the arrest of Craven and Linke must follow."

The Commissioner gazed at a signed white card with a wax impression on it, and shook his head.

"We must act more promptly than that, Shelton. This thumb-print clinches the thing in the most deadly manner. It is the one clue we wholly failed to trace in the Massingham trial. You know it as well as I do, Shelton; you're only trying to make things easier for me. We can verify

the clue here, and if it is correct, Sir Melmoth Craven must be under lock and key tonight."

He glanced at the door.

"Why isn't that man here with the photographs?" he said irritably.

"He'll be here in a minute, sir," said the C.I.D. chief. "He is getting them from the records office."

The Commissioner leaned back and drummed with his fingers on the desk.

"If the evidence came from any one else, I would not touch it with a ten-foot pole—till it had been sifted and threshed out. But this amazing woman, Mrs. Gordon! It seems a queer source, doesn't it?" he said thoughtfully. "And yet, Shelton, four times already she has put vital evidence in the hands of the police. And always absolutely accurate."

"She cleared up the Hartopp forgeries case," said the chief of the C.I.D.

The Commissioner nodded.

"Look at this note," he said "which comes separately with the documents." He read out from a typed slip of paper.

"The police are welcome, at the trial, to the whole credit of tracing the witnesses and obtaining the evidence enclosed herewith."

The Commissioner laughed. Mr. Shelton gave a wry smile.

"Rather galling, isn't it, Shelton? Between ourselves—a trifle humiliating, eh? But what can we do? It saves the face of your Department. You are going to have a somewhat belated triumph. Brilliant as your organisation is—and it was never better than it has been in your hands—the cleverest people may slip us sometimes."

"Thank you for that, sir," said the C.I.D. chief drily.

"The woman's case is complete and masterly. This certified thumb-print alone is enough to require the arrest of Craven. I'd give a trifle," said the Commissioner pensively, "to know how she got hold of it."

"I'd give more than a trifle to have her in our service, sir," said Shelton. "And, by the way, this is something of a triumph for Haggard. By the light of this evidence, we see now that his conduct of the defence, and the daring theory he advanced, was correct. He had none of the proofs, yet here they are in black and white; but even he did not point to Craven as the murderer. I see his judgeship is announced today."

"I have always thought there was something wrong in the Orme case," said the Commissioner.

"We know that, in spite of the utmost caution, an innocent man may sometimes suffer. The evidence against him was fatal—damning. There was hardly a point in his favour. The broadest-minded jury could not have pronounced otherwise than they did. The defence was a cobweb of brilliant theorising, and the alibi of Craven seemed perfect.

"And yet, week by week, the strangest facts about Craven have reached us; the stories of his past, and the ugliest rumours of his present. Linke, too, was a black spot on the sheet. Yet our book was closed, our work ended, and I doubt if the truth would ever have come to light. It's an astounding piece of work. The only mystery unexplained is this—what interest can Mrs. Gordon have in bringing Melmoth Craven to justice? For she must have an interest, and a great one. Yet we do not know it."

"We did not know what interest she had in tracking the Hartopp forgeries," said Shelton. "I hate not knowing things—to know them is my trade. But that woman beats me, and to you, since we are alone, I own it. There is a deep mystery about her. She is one of the richest women in London. Among people who want to borrow money, she has a reputation that would melt a

steel safe door. But on the rare occasions when that woman has come within my knowledge, she has been always on the side of truth and justice. I think," he added in a lower voice, "that even I should care very little to have her for an enemy."

"In the present case," said the Commissioner drily, "I should say that, whatever her motives, she has proved your friend, Shelton. Well, I have here all that I require. It only remains to make sure that this print of the dagger with the thumb-mark is genuine, and tallies with our own records. It is hard to see how it can have come into her possession." There was a rap at the door. "Yes, come in!"

An official entered, bringing a docketed envelope to the Commissioner.

"This is the photograph you asked for, sir."

"Stay a moment," said the Commissioner, and he drew out the official photo-enlargement of Orme's trench-dagger. "Has a copy of this ever been issued?"

"One applied for and given to the defence before the trial, sir," said the official.

The Commissioner nodded, and the man left the room.

"Perfectly in order," said the Commissioner,

comparing the photographs carefully. He took a form from his desk and filled it in.

"Here is a warrant for the arrest of Sir Melmoth Craven. Have it executed at once."

Shelton nodded, took the warrant, and made quickly for the door.

"And take all precautions," called the Commissioner after him. "He may know what is in the wind."

. . . . . .

Two men in bowler hats and unobtrusive grey tweeds arrived quietly at Sir Melmoth's address in Prince's Gate. The time was within half an hour of midnight. They found the janitor of the flats about to lock up.

"Sir Melmoth Craven returned here tonight?" one of the men in grey asked him.

"Came back more than an hour ago," said the janitor.

"Thanks. Keep that door unlocked another five minutes. And call a taxi-cab, will you?"

The janitor stared, but there was something so quietly authoritative about the speaker, that he obeyed. The two men went up to the door of Sir Melmoth's flat and pressed the bell-push.

The bell rang with startling clearance, and the whirr of it was followed by dead silence. Again

it was rung, and again, but there was no answer. One of the men peeped through the letter-box. There was a light in the front room. He knocked sharply, and the knocks echoed hollow through the house.

The two men glanced at each other.

"Something wrong," he said, briefly. "Orders are definite."

The other took a bunch of flat steel keys from his pocket, inserted one in the lock, slipped a small steel rod through the ring, twisted it, and pushed. The door swung open. The two men entered the room where the light was. On the threshold, they stopped dead.

Sir Melmoth Craven sat in a chair, one of his arms resting on the table. His attitude was easy and natural. On his face was a faint, mocking grin. His eyes stared with ghastly intensity at the intruders.

One of the men crept forward, and peered into Sir Melmoth's face. The other lifted a glass that stood on the table and looked at it. In the dregs at the bottom was a fine, grey-white sediment.

He set the glass slowly down, and nodded towards the telephone.

"Call the Yard, Jack," he said, "and then ring up the St. John Street mortuary."

CHAPTER XXX

PEACE

"THE congratulations of an entire nation to-day greet Colonel John Orme, V.C., M.P., on the vindication of his name and honour. A great wrong has been committed in the name of the Law.

"It is thirty-one days since Sir Melmoth Craven was found dead in his room by the police, who entered it with a warrant for his arrest on the charge of having murdered Herbert Massingham. He preferred to die by his own hand, rather than face the fate which with absolute certainty awaited him.

"The conclusion yesterday of the Orme-Craven Inquiry (reported in full on another page) rings down the curtain on the most tragic drama that has occupied our courts of law within living memory. It is strange and disquieting to reflect that the super-scoundrel Craven all but succeeded in evading the penalties for his misdeeds, and that he might have continued to live in security as a

legislator, while an innocent man suffered for his crime.

"It appears, however, that in spite of the jury's verdict, and the circumstantially fatal evidence against the accused, the police were never fully satisfied with the result of the Orme trial. Certain clues which they subsequently obtained were followed up relentlessly. If their success is a little belated, much credit must yet be given to their skill and industry, for their difficulties were great.

"The conspiracy of Sir Melmoth Craven and the man Simon Linke to deprive Orme of his seat in Parliament, as proved at the inquiry, was the first step and cause which led up to the graver crime. Linke, arrested the day after Craven's decease, and with the evidence of his bribery clear against him, made full confession. Linke, though an unsavoury rascal, had no connection with the murder of Massingham. He has been indicted for his share in the election conspiracy, and received a sentence which, most people will agree, is less than his deserts.

"Massingham, an honest and upright man, discovered his chief's roguery, and was about to make a full exposure of it to Orme when he met his death at Craven's hands. No deadlier situation ever

faced an innocent man, than when Orme arrived at the hotel and was found with the murdered man. Fortune favoured Craven in every way. He had fled to Liverpool, cleverly establishing an alibi, and destroying the proofs of the truth which Massingham carried with him. Yet in the end, the unconsidered trifle—the thumb-print on the dagger, which no one dreamed of connecting with Craven—proved his undoing.

"So ends an amazing case.

"Some strange rumours, and certain incidents at the inquiry, have suggested Craven's complicity in an earlier crime—the Ducros kidnapping outrage which caused a sensation last October. It is considered likely that this will be cleared up.

"There would be nothing surprising in Sir Melmoth Craven's association with this Ducros, or any other rascal. By the light of recent evidence, most connections of the deceased man would seem to be dark and sinister. He had a natural propensity for evil. Even his valet, a typical manservant, of apparently exemplary character and behaviour, turns out to be an ex-gaol bird named Stephens, badly wanted in the Argentine, and doubtless of much use to his late employer. Stephens absconded on the night of Craven's death, but is known to have embarked on a Lima-

bound ship. He will doubtless have occasion to regret the length of the Law's arm.

"Enough, however, of this galaxy of knaves.

"One more excellent result follows the finding of the Court of Inquiry. The decision of the magisterial court at Westington, which unseated Orme, becomes void. John Orme steps out of prison, not only a free man, but with a seat in the Legislature of his country awaiting him. His welcome will be unparalleled. The heart of every man and woman in these islands goes out to a brave man who has suffered unjustly."

. . . . . .

A modest paragraph in another column, quite overshadowed by the bold headlines and full columns of the Orme-Craven report, follows:

"NOTORIOUS MONEY-LENDER'S WILL
"THE END OF 'GORDONS, LIMITED'"

"The contents of the last will and testament of Mrs. Gordon have now been made known, and the will is shortly to be admitted to probate. The gross personalty is expected to exceed half a million.

"The report of the death of Mrs. Gordon, published nearly four weeks ago—only two days, indeed, after the greater sensation of Sir Melmoth

Craven's suicide—is recalled by this extraordinary document.

"Many people in the City of London will remember the dark-clad, silent figure, always veiled, and with a stooping gait, that used to trudge twice daily between Gordon's offices in Gresham Lane and the humble lodging in the City Wall. It was well for them, perhaps, if they had no closer acquaintance with her.

"On the evening of the twenty-third, she made that journey for the last time. It was nearly noon on the following day when the woman who cleans the house made the discovery. Mrs. Gordon lay dead in her bed. She had died, apparently, in her sleep.

"At the inquest, the cause of death was found to be a malady of the heart, of long standing, and quite unsuspected by those who came in contact with her. She lived entirely alone. Her death was as peaceful as her life had been strenuous and exacting.

"Mrs. Gordon was extremely wealthy. 'Gordon's was the most notorious usury firm in England; how many branches it had, and how far its secret tentacles reached, will probably never be known. Mrs. Gordon was its directress, its proprietor, and its brain and soul. She was very bitterly hated.

"Sinister though her reputation was, it must be owned that her victims were not of a type to excite much sympathy. The cleverest rogue never got the better of her, nor did she ever come within the reach of the law. Most clients declared her a relentless blood-sucker, entirely pitiless. Occasionally, however, she showed whims of freakish and unexpected generosity.

"Strangest fact of all, perhaps, is that with the passing of Mrs. Gordon, 'Gordon's, Limited,' comes to an end. Her will, which was deposited with the Provincial and Counties Bank, provides for the winding-up, in the shortest time possible, of the business, the settlement of all debts, and the liquidation of the assets.

"Under the terms of the will, Mr. Samuel Drave, her confidential manager, is sole executor, and to him is entrusted the settlement of the business and the extinction of 'Gordon's.' It can be done within six months. It is expressly stipulated that, under no circumstances nor any change of name, is the firm to continue its existence.

"Mr. Drave himself is bequeathed a legacy of £70,000, and ten separate amounts of £15,000 each are allotted to ten other names that appear in the will—doubtless employees of the firm.

"The entire balance of the estate, which it is

said will be over a quarter of a million, is left wholly to charities. Four children's hospitals benefit equally, and the remainder goes to funds for the betterment of the condition of children in the poorer neighbourhoods of London, and to help in the wiping away of slum areas, particularly in the Borough and Woolwich.

"If there was much that was questionable in Mrs. Gordon's life, by her death at least she has made some amends.

"These princely legacies will go far towards relieving suffering in the worst districts of London, and many a child of the slums, yet unborn, will never guess from what strange sources came the gold that raised him from the mire, and made him a healthy and an honest citizen."

. . . . . .

The sunlight streamed through the open windows of Selby Manor, the Garths' place in Hertfordshire. It lit Margaret's hair with a silken radiance, as she turned to the opening door with parted lips.

John Orme entered. The next moment, Margaret was in his arms.

"My love!" he said, as her lips trembled to his. "My darling!"

She lifted her eyes at last, smiling and wet.

"What a shame to bring you here, John, to this lonely place! And all the world ringing with your name. What a welcome waits for you in London!"

"What is all that to me?" he said, and held her to his heart. "The only welcome I want is yours. Ah, Margaret, it was your love—it was your love that saved me."

"You know to whom we owe everything?" she said gently.

The door stood wide. Mrs. Garth entered, singing softly to herself. She looked older, and silver threads shone in her hair. She stopped when she saw the lovers, and smiled.

"Don't move, children," she said quietly. "You look charming like that."

Margaret ran swiftly to her arms. Orme followed, and took her hand in his.

"What can I say to you?" he said in a low voice at last. "Your splendid courage and loyalty—your faith in me through the darkest hours. The miracle of it all!"

Mrs. Garth put an arm round Margaret, and a hand on Orme's shoulder.

"Do you think," she said, "that there is anything in the world I would not do for Margaret, and for you—because she loves you?"

She looked at Orme's keen, strong face.

"Love is your world now," she said. "Remember, too, that in the world of men, a great place waits for you."

"And for you!" he answered. "The head of Garth's is the most wonderful woman living."

She shook her head. There was a smile in the wise, tired eyes that looked into his.

"I have done with Garth's," she said quietly. "It will continue without me. I have done with the world of Cornhill and Mayfair. I am happy in Margaret's happiness, and yours. Go forward, children, and drink deep of the cup of Life. For me, at last, there is peace."

THE END

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